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THE
IDEAL
SPONGER
LIFE

VISIT...

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Prologue — Their Respective Speculations

Several days after the details for Zenjirou's debut had been decided, Octavia was returning to the nearby Márquez Estate for the first time in a while.

The plentiful use of a white, marble-like rock and the frequent arches made it clear to even a layperson that the building had been built during the same time period as the palace. Such a home, constructed so close in both time and place to the royal abode was not something the average noble could obtain, and the estate itself clearly demonstrated the position of the Márquez family within the kingdom.

"Stop here if you would; I would like to walk for a while," Octavia said to the driver of the two-steed carriage from her seat within.

"At once, ma'am," the middle-aged man escorting her answered before bringing the carriage to a quiet stop with practiced movements.

"Watch your step, Lady Octavia," her young maid warned her as she stepped down from the carriage.

"Thank you; you take care as well," she replied.

It was the hottest season of the year, and while the bright sunlight made her reflexively narrow her eyes, it was about five degrees cooler inside the gate. The garden had artificial pools scattered throughout, with greenery planted all around to make wind flow over the water towards the house. While the weather might have been unbearable to someone from Japan, Octavia had grown up in Capua and was used to it.

She seemed to take the array of guards armed with short spears and the attendants around her as a natural fact of life as she walked up the short path from the gate. The walkway was made of reddish-brown stones to reduce the glare and was lined with southern plants that boasted vivid flowers of red and yellow, similar to hibiscus.

Many of the colors in the kingdom were vibrant, and not just the natural

elements. The clothing Octavia wore was a startlingly bright blue as well. It was traditional Capuan clothing and was relatively reserved, not showing off the lines of her body, but the color meant that the modern man would call it “showy.” Or at least the outfit wouldn’t be seen as clothing that a married woman in her twenties would wear on a day-to-day basis.

She finally arrived at the double doors to the building and they were slowly opened from within by two burly men. Beyond was an aged, refined-looking man standing in the foyer.

“Welcome home, Lady Octavia,” said the old butler in his ever-calm voice as he smiled at the young countess.

“It is good to be back, Serlio. Is he in his usual place?”

“Indeed, the lord is waiting on the second floor,” he answered with a polite bow of his head.

“I see, then please inform him I shall be there once I have changed and freshened up.”

“Right away, ma’am.”

“Thank you,” she said with a soft smile, walking into the estate proper with light steps, followed closely by her attendant.

Roughly half an hour later, Octavia entered a room of the estate and faced her husband, Count Manuel Márquez, for the first time in half a year.

“Welcome back, Octavia,” he said, rising from a well-worn sofa and spreading his arms to greet his thirty-years-younger second wife.

The count was a stocky, middle-aged noble of fifty or so. He wasn’t particularly tall, and would probably have been about the same height as Zenjirou’s 172 cm. He was somewhat rotund, but his short hair and well-maintained facial hair had kept its color well, so he looked younger than his years.

“It has been a while, dear,” she said with an unaffected smile before accepting his embrace.

After a silent moment, they pulled apart, and the stocky man and dainty

woman moved towards a corner of the room and sat down facing each other. The sunlight streaming in through the window was as hot as ever, but there was a channel of water flowing below it that made the breeze surprisingly cool.

The count slaked his dry throat with a cup of cold tea that a maid had brought in before starting to speak with a slightly sober expression. "My apologies for the sudden workload."

"Not at all. It was an honor I was undeserving of, to aid in the education of such a noble."

"Indeed, you have always been one to please," he allowed with a wry smile, without even trying to disguise his reaction to his wife's ever-benevolent response.

Usually, noblewomen were said to be the ones most adept at keeping their true motives hidden from their faces and words, but his second wife was one of the few exceptions. If everything he saw from her ever turned out to be a facade, the count would end up developing a serious distrust of women.

"So, what were your thoughts about Sir Zenjirou? I would like to hear your blunt opinion."

"Very well," she answered smoothly. "He was quite a pleasant person. He was very motivated to learn and I believe him to be reliable."

"Hmm, I see," he said, nodding at each point, mentally picking apart the information from her words.

Her view of people, if you ignored her excessive kindness when evaluating them, was relatively grounded. If you reduced her praise by a tenth, and expanded her criticism by ten times, you could get a relatively accurate view of a person.

Interpreting her words, he determined that Zenjirou was "almost naively forbearing to subordinates," "lacking manly ambition," and "wise enough to understand his position." Frankly, a rather unsuitable person to use as a foothold into the royal family. It was difficult to embroil a person in your schemes if they lacked ambition and were conservative, yet still rational.

That said, Zenjirou was the only male currently in the Capuan royal family.

While he could prove a difficult target, merely sitting back and watching wasn't an option.

After a period of silent contemplation, he continued candidly. "So, if you were to provide a concubine for him, what sort of woman would you choose?"

Although Octavia was a high-ranking noble by birth, and should have been used to such topics, the young lady's eyes went wide in surprise for a moment before she gave a reluctant smile and shook her head.

"That... may be a thought best set aside for now. While I personally witnessed Their Majesties together only a few times, from what I heard from those working in the inner palace, the two seem very close. I think perhaps a woman installed there in such a position would soon find herself out of place?"

It was only natural, but a concubine held exceedingly little power compared to the queen. And in this case, rather than being "king," "queen consort," and "concubine," they would be "queen," "*her* consort," and "concubine." There may have been a large enough difference between queen consort and concubine already, but there was just no comparison between *queen* and concubine. So while the societal position held by a concubine was normally much lower than the queen consort's, the one place they had the potential to beat her in was when it came to the king's affections. If there was no chance of that with Aura and Zenjirou, there would be nothing but a lonely future awaiting a woman sent to come between them.

"Hmm, they are that intimate?"

"They are."

Count Márquez frowned thoughtfully, not entirely believing his wife's declaration. He wasn't stupid or obstinate by any means, but the only viewpoint he had was that of a typical male in the Capuan Kingdom. From his own perspective, he struggled to conceive of a man who could love Queen Aura to such an extent. The ideal woman for a Capuan would be one like the second wife sitting in front of him right now.

Essentially, the concept of "a good woman" was one who would stand silently behind her husband without interjecting. Whilst sagacity was desirable, wit was not, assiduousness was a virtue, yet assertiveness was considered a vice.

As far as the count was concerned, Aura Capua as a monarch was a woman of valor such that it was a pity she had been born female. But he found it hard to say she had any particular charm as a woman. Of course, he would concede that she was at least a beauty with a bewitching figure.

“He is truly in love with her?” he asked again for confirmation.

“He is, without a doubt,” she answered unwaveringly. “For him to abandon the only world he knew until now... what other reason can there be but love?”

To be fair, only half of the reason Zenjirou had accepted the queen’s proposal had been an affection for Aura, but half had been to escape from the unending grind of day-to-day employment. Only Zenjirou himself knew that, though.

At any rate, for Aura to be Zenjirou’s type was something the count could only see as being somewhat contrary to his expectations. The kingdom dominated the western part of the Southern Continent, but Aura was the only woman of her ilk. At the very least, there were none like her that Márquez could make use of, so sending Zenjirou’s preferred type to the inner palace to curry favor would be impossible.

A frown came over his face. “Hmm... in that case, perhaps the best action would be to act in support of Their Majesties.”

His conclusion was a primarily reactive one. The Márquez family already held significant influence within the current administration. Conniving to expand their power was almost instinctive for nobles, but there was no need to gamble with their current position. If the relationship between the queen and her consort was so strong, perhaps it would be best to better the queen’s impression of his own household by wholly supporting their union. In fact, it was unquestionable that the priority of that union was to produce a direct heir of the queen rather than to expand the bloodline through concubines.

“Yes, I believe so too,” Octavia nodded with a heartfelt smile at her husband’s decision. She was aware that the continuation of the royal bloodline and the connecting of families was more important than emotions to most nobles and royals. But still, emotionally, she wanted to see the loving couple create a happy family.

Márquez could guess her thoughts from the wide smile on her face, and he

smiled reluctantly in turn as he murmured, “Still, I cannot fathom his tastes...”

That statement, which could well be considered *lèse-majesté*—treason—if Aura were to hear it, was his honest opinion.



Meanwhile, Aura was visiting the royal army’s training grounds outside the city after a period of absence.

Plants in the Southern Continent grew abnormally quickly and were infamous for rapidly overrunning fields if left untended. The region she was currently in was frequently used by battalions of infantry and hundreds of cavalry. Despite the grounds not being maintained in any real fashion, bare ground was visible as far as the eye could see.

The group using the grounds today could well be called the elites of the royal army. They were the Drake Marksmen Knights.

The usual mount in the Southern Continent was a large reptile called the dash drake. They were inferior in speed compared to the horses of the Northern Continent, but they were far hardier, and there was no comparison in terms of power or stamina. Even compared to the warhorses the northern countries used, they had three to five times the strength.

The drakes did have a severe weakness: being cold-blooded, their activity levels would drop if the temperature fell below a certain level point. But in the Southern Continent, such a concern was barely worthy of mention.

Aura was currently accompanied by General Pujol Guillén as they surveyed the hundred-odd soldiers standing in formation before them. The queen was wearing military dress. The clothing was based around the red colors of the royal family, and while it was decorated with golden embroidery on the sleeves and collar, it was designed for ruggedness and ease of movement.

That wasn’t the impression given off when Aura wore it, though. Despite the thick cloth, her full chest and backside were quite visible. On top of that, the outfit contained a wide belt out of necessity, to hang a sword from, but drew in at the waist, emphasizing her bust and hips. If Zenjirou had been there, he would have doubtless been salivating at the sight.

Of course, the disciplined knights would never leer at their queen that way. The grounds were so quiet you could hear a pin drop. The silence itself spoke highly of the soldiers' dedication. This would be true enough even if there were only humans present, but each of them was currently astride a dash drake. Gathering over a hundred such creatures together without a single knight deviating from formation or a single drake chirping in excitement was an impressive feat.

Satisfied, Aura nodded. "Begin," she commanded, cracking the crop in her right hand against her palm.

"At once! Men, commence your drills!" her companion ordered, his voice as loud as he was tall.

"Rah!" bellowed the knights, moving to show the fruits of their labor as they spurred the drakes on.

What followed was a vigorous demonstration of their efforts to the queen and her general. Men charged with long spears, and others pounded over obstacles created from mud and timber. Still others, perhaps the stars of the show, displayed their archery skills, shooting arrows through distant targets whilst mounted.

Aura paid no mind to the dust that was dirtying her face and hair, instead speaking to the man beside her. "Rather impressive. You have trained them well."

The ambitious general bowed faithfully at her praise. "My thanks. We are finally over eighty percent of our quota. Either this year or next, we should reach our goal."

"Eighty percent in five years? Superb work, General."



Aura's open praise was rare, but the general's achievement was most deserving of it. The heaviest losses in the war had been suffered by these knights. Replenishing their ranks took vast amounts of money and time. One had to simultaneously raise and train the drakes while teaching the men to ride them. To build their numbers back up in a mere six or seven years could certainly be called a grand feat.

Of course, the new troops were still young knights with no combat experience, so while the numbers would be the same, they would likely fall short of the quality of the veterans.

The general's stern countenance didn't shift as he shook his head. "My liege, I would ask that you give that praise to the stable staff. They truly are the ones who have made this possible."

His ambitions may have been all too clear within the court, but Pujol Guillén was a superlative commander who freely credited his subordinates' achievements in battle and training.

"I see. I shall," Aura agreed in response to his candor.

As mounts, the biggest disadvantage to dash drakes over horses was their lifespan. Compared to the twenty or thirty years a horse could live, a dash drake lived for around fifty years. This meant they could be useful on the battlefield for longer, but it also meant that dash drakes born at the same time as horses would take longer to be battle-ready. A horse could be used for cavalry after four or five years, but a dash drake took at least ten years to mature and train.

The newly added drakes were over five years old, which meant that they had been hatched during the war. The breeders' efforts in ensuring that they were all fed, and with more food than a horse required as their greater stature dictated, without a single one dying despite the depleted budget during the war was indeed extraordinary.

At any rate, the restoration of these troops, the foundation of the nation's army, was welcome news.

"Actually, I believe we will be able to increase the military budget next year, if only by a small amount. I shall convey the particulars to you later, so consider

how you will use it,” she informed him with good humor as the thought came to mind.

The increase in military spending was thanks entirely to Zenjirou’s recalculations and his discovery of the embezzlement by some of the local nobles. As a result of the tense discussions over the past few days, Aura had increased the amount of taxes going into the treasury and was directing the majority of that increase towards the military. The money had originally been supporting regional armies, so directing it to non-military matters would have sapped the country’s strength. While their relations with the surrounding kingdoms were mostly experiencing a lull, peace wasn’t enough of a certainty that she could move towards disarmament.

Aura’s words pried the first slight smile of the day from the general.

“Oh, I see. Very well, once the sums are confirmed, I shall gather the views of those most prominent and outline the military’s desires.”

“Please do,” she nodded, still focused on the knights.

“I shall. Fortunately, the upcoming banquet will host many of the eminent members of the military who reside in the city. I should be able to report back without significant delay.”

Her hand holding the crop twitched at that. The upcoming banquet was, of course, Zenjirou’s societal debut. Naturally, she knew that the ambitious general would be aiming to make a positive impression on her husband.

Hm, how will this play out? she wondered.

Her unambitious husband and the embodiment of ambition that was the general might be like oil and water at first glance, but such people could get along quite affably—an amusing idiosyncrasy of humanity.

I would rather such ambition not influence him unduly, but it is not the place of a wife to interject in such relationships between men.

Aura could do nothing but watch, but her relative lack of worry went to show just how much she had started to trust Zenjirou.

“My sister is very much looking forward to it as well. I would greatly

appreciate Sir Zenjirou taking the time to meet her.”

“I see. I shall convey that to him,” she said calmly, unflinching in the face of his ever-obvious aspirations.

Chapter 1 — Societal Debut

The palace was holding a banquet that night in the form of a buffet. These regular events simultaneously provided a place for aristocrats to mingle and served as demonstrations of the power of the kingdom and the royal family.

To put it bluntly, a night like this cost a horrifying amount of money.

The lighting of such a wide space, the various chandeliers hanging from the high ceiling, not to mention the candles burning within them, were not cheap, even from a noble's perspective. Beeswax was produced within the country, but the cultivation of bees was not on the same level as on Earth, so they had to commission the collection of the materials, and importing Sumac Tallow from the east added to the cost, so it was unavoidably expensive.

In addition, the chandeliers were extremely valuable. After all, glass manufacturing didn't exist there, so they were entirely constructed of silver and natural crystals. Buying even a single small one cost a fortune.

The huge red carpet adorning the floor had taken specialist craftsmen three generations to weave, and the high table with a mountain of food atop it had been carved by a skilled carpenter from a single tree. The space was resplendent to such a degree that it would cause not only commoners to go wide-eyed, but mid-level nobles to react in a similar fashion. The topic on the lips of many lower-middle-class nobles for much of the next day would be their attendance of this party.

When Zenjirou first entered the hall, a barrage of introductions to those very nobles in the light of the chandeliers awaited him, and he did his utmost to maintain a smile.

"Zenjirou, allow me to introduce you. This man here is Baron Pantoja. He demonstrated his skill as a commander in the war and now uses his abilities for the benefit of his lands," Aura said from where she stood with her left arm wrapped around Zenjirou's right.

“It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Sir Zenjirou. I am Tomas Pantoja, granted the rank of baron by Her Majesty’s grace.”

“It is good to meet you directly despite the inconvenience it must have caused you.”

The man raised his lowered head with a laugh in the face of Zenjirou’s generous nod.

Aura was wearing a sleeveless orange dress, and while she adjusted the corsage on her right breast, the baron left the couple. As he watched the man leave, Zenjirou let out a careful sigh that wouldn’t be noticed by anyone around him.

I’m shattered...

He was struggling to maintain his posture, smile, and manner of speaking. Then again, it was just as likely to be the unfamiliar clothing and attention from everyone around him that made it so exhausting.

Fortunately, the nobles weren’t ignorant of protocol and would not unceasingly appear to introduce themselves without allowing him to catch his breath. He was managing things as best he could, but if he didn’t pace himself, he’d probably end up making a severe mistake.

Zenjirou was currently wearing the uniform of the royal Capuan family, wide white pants, and a top that was held together by a decorative cord similar to that of Japanese clothing. On top of all that, he wore a red vest-like affair as well.

Fittingly for the hot southern country, even such a formal uniform was nothing stifling, although the ceremonial blade at his waist was heavy, and the perfumed oil slicking his hair into place was itchy and had a strong scent. The blade and oil were familiar to him from the wedding ceremony, but they weren’t easy to get used to. At the moment, they were irritants that simply multiplied his discomfort as time went on.

While the crowd around him temporarily thinned out to let him breathe, Zenjirou memorized the appearance of the fellow who had just been introduced to him.

A man in his forties, medium build, black hair. Name of Baron Pantoja. Way too flattering. Not the best impression... all right, got it. Dammit, I wish they had business cards or something, he quipped mentally while outwardly maintaining his smile.

In the past, while at work, he had certainly needed to memorize names and faces at times, but normally no more than five at once. Tonight, he had already been introduced to dozens of people, and they didn't have the custom of exchanging business cards to fall back on like in Japan, either.

The single saving grace was that, unlike the people back home, the nobles often wore rather distinctive clothing and were therefore fairly easily discernible from one another.

There were two main spheres in Capuan fashion. One was the traditional native dress passed down since time immemorial, and the other was the relatively recent trend from the Northern Continent, which was closer to modern western clothing on Earth. Over a long period, those two spheres had influenced each other and eventually merged. While they were all currently in formal attire, a buffet like tonight's event was comparatively informal, so there was significant variety in how people were dressed. These differences led to Zenjirou assigning rude nicknames in his head to the attendees, like "Sir Tubby Flower-Print," "Lady Purple Sea Lion," and the like.

As far as he could intuit from Aura's reactions, he hadn't caused any real problems yet, though. A banquet like this was unlike a ball in that it didn't require any special skills, nor were there countless behavioral nuances that he had to observe like there would be for a public event. By that metric, the buffet was a good choice for someone like Zenjirou, who boasted only a meager veneer of royalty. The intimate socialization required was an acceptable tradeoff to avoid a more ceremonious event where more complex skills would be expected of him.

While Zenjirou was considering these things, Aura moved a step away from him and picked up a silver goblet from the table before returning.

"Here," she offered.

"Ah, thanks, Aura," he answered, suddenly noticing his thirst with some

surprise as he accepted the cup. It was filled with local fruit wine, which was relatively weak and had a harsh flavor. More than that, though, it was tepid, so not at all what he would have preferred, but it was enough to take the edge off his thirst on a warm night.

“I shall take that,” said a nearby attendant, having been signaled by Aura with a glance when she saw him finish the drink.

“Ah, please do,” he said as the woman took the goblet and withdrew.

Now that he had quenched his thirst and relaxed a little, Aura called out to some nobles who were waiting a respectful distance away, a man and a woman. Zenjirou remembered the woman; she was the only one other than Aura and the maids whom he had met since shutting himself up in the inner palace. Countess Octavia Márquez.

Most of the women in attendance were wearing northern-style dresses like Aura, but Octavia was clad in a traditional outfit and was rather eye-catching because of it. That would mean the plump man standing next to her was Count Manuel Márquez, the father of Rafaello Márquez, one of the former candidates for Aura’s hand and one of the foremost nobles in the country.

Doing his best to keep his review of the pair discreet, Zenjirou observed the man. *Whoa, I’d heard, but he really could be her father. I guess having a beautiful second wife’s a dream for most men, regardless of age.*

Aura abruptly tightened her grip on his arm as his thoughts began to stray towards the impolite. He was shocked for a brief moment, thinking she had read his mind, but soon remembered that this was the signal they had arranged. It meant the person before them was important who he should do his utmost to remember.

“It has been a while, my queen. And it is a pleasure to meet you, Sir Zenjirou,” the man said in greeting.

“My deepest thanks for your invitation today, Your Majesties,” added Octavia.

They bowed courteously. Aura kept her usual smile on her face as she introduced them.

“I am glad you came, Count Márquez, Lady Octavia. Allow me to introduce

you, Zenjirou. This is Lord Manuel of the Márquez County, one of the most preeminent regions of our fair country, and I am sure that Lady Octavia needs no introduction?”

“So, you are Count Márquez? I have heard of you, and your wife has been of great help,” Zenjirou said, straightening himself as the couple bowed once more.

“Indeed, I am most pleased that my wife has been able to assist you.”

“You honor me, Sir Zenjirou.”

He could feel the subtle interest the surrounding nobles had taken in their conversation. The closest nobles were over ten meters away, so they likely couldn’t hear exactly what was being said, but he needed to remain aware of their regard.

Aura had no intention of forcing her husband to bear the brunt of the formalities, given his inexperience. Not wanting to leave him open to potential embarrassment, she expertly steered the conversation, her arm still around his.

“There is no need for humility here, Count. Your wife’s blessings of beauty and cleverness are as splendid as the rumors suggest. I hope that she will henceforth lend her abilities to our kingdom along with your own.”

“You praise us more than we deserve. Thank you, Your Majesty.”

“I shall do my utmost to aid the country in any way I am able, my queen,” Octavia replied.

Zenjirou left most of the interaction to Aura, simply adding words of agreement or consideration when appropriate. It was more important that he avoid leaving a bad impression than specifically make a good one. Even better would be to leave no impression at all, considering his position as the queen’s consort.

And so the curtain rose peacefully on Zenjirou’s debut.

But just because it had started out peacefully, there was no guarantee that things would continue that way until curtain call. In the first place, the main goal of the banquet was to show everyone that his relationship with Aura was a

healthy one, and with that in mind, they couldn't spend the entire night arm-in-arm. If they were to do so, it would only fuel the rumors that Aura was restricting her husband's freedoms. To avoid that, they had decided that after finishing the general introductions, they would go their own ways for a while.

Having finally separated from Aura, he let out a breath as he took a stroll around the huge room. The looks he was getting were favorable, but no one would speak to him uninvited. In Capua, people of lower rank addressing someone of higher rank was considered disrespectful. While the formalities were relaxed to a certain degree at an event like this, and a level of "rudeness" would be ignored, there would be very few who would directly address royalty.

Those who could perhaps address him without coming across as impertinent would be the lords of larger territories, cabinet ministers, or possibly generals. However, such people generally excelled in etiquette and knew exactly when and how to do things, so there were few who would *personally* address him in that way. If there was a lord or general so daring, they would have to either hold societal norms and customs in contempt, or be so ambitious despite their already high position that they were comfortable ignoring social rules entirely.

Guess I'll have to talk to someone, then.

Zenjirou hadn't handled only internal matters in his company, he'd also performed external negotiations, so didn't shy away from talking to new people. He panned his gaze over the room to find someone he could speak to without his position causing issues. But as he did so...

"My apologies, Sir Zenjirou, may I ask for a moment of your time?" asked a sturdy-looking man from his side, genuflecting as he spoke.

Uh, wait, what? No way... he spoke to me? Who the hell could this guy be? Zenjirou immediately panicked at the "impossible" event (according to what he had been taught about Capuan customs), but his expression reflexively corrected itself as he turned slowly to face the speaker.

"What...?"

He surveyed the guy for a moment. Even on one knee, it was obvious that the man was huge and well-built. He was dressed in somewhat unrefined clothing for the situation, black with decorations woven in olden thread, something

Zenjirou vaguely remembered as being the uniform for high-ranking military types. From the number of tassels on his left breast, this giant must have been top military brass.

Before Zenjirou, illuminated by the light of the chandelier, was a true knight. Not a fairy tale Prince Charming sort of knight, but one with the bare minimum of societal graces who saw their worth on the battlefield as a fierce protector of the kingdom.

Looking down at the man, Zenjirou frantically collected his thoughts. The people who could get away with addressing him in this manner were major lords, cabinet ministers, and generals. For such a person to approach him, they would have to be, for better or worse, a veteran, with little regard for politeness. And for them to do so while fully aware of the risk of inviting the prince consort's displeasure, they would have to be exceedingly ambitious.

Military, veteran, ambitious. Those three words clicked in his head and formed the name of a man that Aura had warned him about.

"Oh, Lord Pujol, I believe. Do you have some business with me?" he asked after clearing his throat.

This was General Pujol Guillén. It was a name he had heard several times before. Much like Lord Rafaello from the Márquez family, this was someone Zenjirou knew to have been one of the candidates for Aura's hand. He'd also been told by Aura that he was someone to pay special attention to.

"Indeed, Sir Zenjirou. I wish to offer you a token of my esteem. Thus, I have sought you out despite my rudeness in doing so. It is a modest token, but I would still be extremely honored if you were to accept it."

The leader of the Drake Marksmen Knights, General Pujol Guillén, still knelt as he looked directly up at the prince consort to give his statement. This young general speaking so plainly was the pride of the kingdom. Such a combination unavoidably drew attention and Zenjirou noticed the chatter between the surrounding nobles had halted as they all looked on with interest.

Even while privately lamenting this development, he affected a clearing of his throat. *Argh, damn it all. I didn't learn any of this stuff. Am I going to have to ad-lib it? Gimme a break...*

Zenjirou had always been the type to prepare answers to the most likely questions when giving presentations at work or negotiating between his company and others. Being put on the spot like this, where he'd need to play things by ear, was definitely a weakness of his. Even so, he clawed his hasty preparations together to compare them to the situation he now found himself in, in an effort to find the best response.

Umm, it's a buffet, so a little rudeness should be allowed, yeah? Right, I'm royalty, and he's a general, so...

His inner voice was feeling relatively venomous towards the general. He knew that animosity for people you had just met wasn't exactly praiseworthy, but he wasn't enough of a paragon of virtue to hold a neutral opinion of his beloved wife's former marriage candidate.

Keeping his thoughts and feelings from showing on his face, Zenjirou went with a fairly safe opener. "General, there is no need to kneel here tonight. Please stand."

"At once, Sire!" Pujol agreed, rising.

Zenjirou suppressed the urge to step back at the imposing appearance of the fellow before him. He was massive, a whole head taller than Zenjirou himself, so he must have been at least 190 cm... more likely midway through the 190s, or maybe even two meters tall. He also looked to be heavier than 100 kg, and that wasn't in fat but in muscle tempered for battle.

"Let us speak of business, then. I believe you said something about a gift," Zenjirou went on, looking the general in the eyes as he went through the information in his head. He had been warned of the chance of someone accosting him with a gift. Apparently, currying favor with valuables was a constant between both worlds.

I seem to remember that I can't refuse it without a reason, but the problem is how to accept.

If he seemed overly happy, the giver could expect to receive appropriate remuneration for such pleasure, and if he appeared disappointed, it would publicly embarrass the knight. Standing there, with the possibility of his reaction changing the fate of those around him, made him feel the weight of an

enormous pressure.

Ignorant of the thoughts running through Zenjiro's mind, the general gave a short affirmative and glanced at a younger knight waiting behind him... a subordinate, most likely. Carrying something thin wrapped in a white cloth, the young man jogged over to their side and reverently offered the object to the general.

When Zenjiro saw that, his expression faltered slightly and he couldn't help but widen his eyes. *What? Did he bring the actual thing rather than just the certificate?*

Zenjiro had heard that when giving a gift at such an event, the giver would normally offer a certificate, and the actual gift would arrive at the recipient's estate at a later date. After all, it wasn't uncommon for gifts between nobles to consist of things like thoroughbred dash drakes, or second estates that could serve as summer homes. Of course, it wasn't impossible to hand over something like jewelry or a sword in person, but it didn't happen as a rule. On the off chance such a gift was refused, it would bring even more shame to the one offering it.

"Please take a look, Sir Zenjiro," the general said with a sideways glance as he removed the wrapping with practiced movements and laid the contents bare.

What's this? A bow, I guess? Zenjiro wondered. It seemed to be a simple piece of wood, in a complex curved shape. To his eyes, it had no special decorations and was a bow that appeared to focus on practicality more than anything else.

Seemingly approving of his reaction, the general straightened and spoke proudly. "This is a wyvern bow, made by one of the leading craftsmen in the capital."

At that, the audience broke out into impressed murmurs. Apparently, this "wyvern bow" was something of great value, worthy of a noble's notice. Zenjiro examined it again, but it still didn't seem to match their reaction.

In accordance with the procedures to bring it into the palace, the spaces for the string were filled with yellow ochre clay and stamped with the royal seal. It

was only about half the length of a Japanese bow used in kyudo and looked rather unreliable based on his incomplete knowledge.

The general seemed to understand that his lack of a reaction was due to not knowing anything about the wyvern bow, and he explained in a low voice, “A wyvern bow is formed by the combination of a thin wooden board and loosened drake tendons and ribs. As you can see, it is only around half the size of an archer’s longbow, but its strength and range exceed those of the other. Its size also makes it easy to maneuver, and a skilled man can maintain a high rate of fire and accuracy. It can perhaps be called the strongest weapon within the cavalry.”

A bow made of several materials was commonly called a composite bow. Such things existed in history on Earth and had proven their worth on the battlefield.

“However,” the general continued, “there are very few knights who can lay claim to a wyvern bow. They require flexible tendons and bones, after all, which must be harvested from a growing dash drake, so they are exceedingly expensive. The manufacturing process also requires a commensurate investment of time and effort.”

Dash drakes would have to be five to seven years old to harvest these components, as once they stopped growing, their bones would harden and lose their flexibility. While it wasn’t to the same extent, that was also true for the tendons.

Zenjirou now understood what kind of item this wyvern bow was, based on the general’s explanation, and he felt a muscle jumping in his cheek. He had been unaware of the existence of these bows, but he had already been informed of how important dash drakes were to the country. Their numbers had seen a sharp decline during the war, and even now the breeders were working daily to restore the population to what the military required.

Slaughtering a young dash drake to make it into a weapon meant that if a single drake could be used to create five bows, those five bows needed to provide the same value as a fully grown drake or the cost simply wouldn’t be worth it. He didn’t know how many bows could actually be made from each

drake, but from Pujol's demeanor, it couldn't have been that many.

"Sir Zenjirou?" Pujol asked searchingly, unsure of the prince consort's somewhat bizarre reaction.

"Allow me to ask you, General," Zenjirou said as calmly as he could, "can this wyvern bow be easily wielded by anyone?"

"It cannot," the knight answered honestly, not understanding the thrust of his question. "After all, its small size coupled with its enormous strength and range means that even many soldiers cannot fully draw it."

Zenjirou resisted a sigh upon hearing the very answer he had expected. A weapon that was powerful but difficult to use, and made of components so valuable that only a few existed... It was something that would be utterly wasted if it were to be stored away. However, the reactions of those around him clearly demonstrated that it was an appropriate gift for royalty. If he were to decline it, could he keep the uproar to a minimum?

Gathering his wits, Zenjirou answered as he slowly thought things over. "I am honored that you consider me worthy of such a gift. However, a veteran warrior like yourself can surely tell," he said, stretching his arms out to either side of his body to display himself, "I would have no place on the battlefield, given my lack of strength." The loose clothing covered him, but a skilled veteran could tell that Zenjirou was no warrior simply from the size of the wrists poking out of his sleeves.

"Perhaps, but—" the general began before Zenjirou continued.

"Therefore, I shall accept this bow, but not for myself. General, there must be some of your subordinates who have not yet received a wyvern bow. Would you select such a knight who has a deep-seated loyalty to the royal family and convey it to him? No other use of this bow could make me happier."

Silence fell over the hall for a brief moment.

"Very well... I shall ensure it is delivered to a soldier who will never betray your ideals," Pujol replied after a long silence, bowing deeply as he held the bow.

Having watched the incident unfold from a little ways away, Aura breathed a

sigh of relief when she saw the threat had been dealt with.

Good, he managed to avoid taking the bow.

If he had accepted it then and there, things would have become awfully complicated. If it had been a jeweled sword or ceremonial spear then taking it wouldn't have been a real concern, but accepting an actual weapon would have been construed as him intending to learn how to use it. That, in turn, would have made it particularly difficult to refuse an offer of training from the general.

By stating that he had no intention of taking up arms, he had indeed lowered himself in the audience's eyes. However, rather than it being a blunt refusal, it had been one of accepting ownership and entrusting it temporarily to a worthy knight, so it had brought no shame on the one giving the gift, either. While the decision had certainly resulted in a perceived loss of masculinity, it had been done without inviting hostility.

Considering Aura's position, it was the best result she could have hoped for. She had been prepared to intervene and bring the matter to a close herself if it came to it, although that would have only strengthened the rumors that she was controlling her husband.

"A rather splendid response, Your Majesty," Count Márquez commented from her side, a smile on his face.

"Ah, my apologies. We were in the middle of a discussion," Aura answered, adjusting her corsage and turning back to him, the count having remained at her side for some time now.

The plump noble smiled cheerfully. "Not at all. It is only natural for your eyes to seek out Sir Zenjirou. You've only been married for a short time. It is most reassuring to see such a pleasant relationship between the two of you," he said, shaking his head with some amusement.

"I am glad you would say so," she returned with a strained smile and a slight snort at the potentially sarcastic statement. She then turned to look at the general and Zenjirou again. General Pujol, having given the wyvern bow to his subordinate, was now conversing enthusiastically with the prince consort. The rest of their discussion seemed to be relatively benign, though, and the expression on Zenjirou's face was relaxed as he answered in kind.

Of course, if the general's ambitions could be stamped out by a simple failure or two, he wouldn't be known as "the hungry wolf." Aura strained to hear his voice.

"...indeed, your duty is to pass on your blood to the next generation. There is no need for you to expose yourself to danger on the battlefield. Please leave that duty to my men and me. Once the line of succession is assured, it is my humble opinion that you will perhaps need a concubine to create your own branch family."

Aura's expression tightened for a moment as she listened from afar, noting that the general had moved smoothly from his gift offensive to a marriage offense.

She continued to listen from just outside of the general's line of sight as he continued grandly, "On another note, I believe you are aware that the Guillén family has close blood ties to Capuan royalty. I have brought my younger sister along with me today, and I would like to take this opportunity to introduce her to you."

That wasn't "on another note" in the slightest. It was so utterly obvious that Aura wanted to declare that even a brothel promoting its wares would dress the conversation up a little more.

A sense of impending crisis came over her as she watched. She would have to interject now. The situation was becoming dangerous. Her husband had grown more accustomed to the niceties of society than she had expected, but she found it unlikely that he could stand up to a direct, almost outright taboo, assault from General Pujol on the very night of his debut.

I'll have to stop this myself! she decided, but before she could take a step, Count Márquez spoke up mildly from her side, where he had been watching it all play out with a smile.

"Ah, that reminds me, I have yet to convey my regards to the good general. Your Majesty, my deepest apologies for interrupting our discussion, but would you object to a brief pause?"

Aura stopped short at the count's affected tone and turned to look at him. She didn't know what he was planning, but the words themselves were

perfectly timed. If she were to reply with, “In that case, I shall accompany you,” she could claim that she wasn’t purposefully butting into Zenjirou’s conversation just to put a stop to the hungry wolf’s schemes.

And what is your scheme, Count? Are you trying to curry favor?

Although reluctant to accept his help without knowing what his motives were, she couldn’t stand to sit back and watch Zenjirou struggle, and there was no time to consider the situation too deeply.

“Not at all; in fact, I shall accompany you,” she answered, immediately coming to a decision as she took the offered aid.

Parties within the palace were often called “a swordless battlefield,” but that was rather an exaggeration. To the vast majority of nobles, the events were nothing more than a chance to meet their peers and engage in idle conversation. A feast of delicious food and drink for the mouth, and various lords and ladies in their finery for the eyes. It was an elegant playground for them, so there was a vanishing minority who still used the parties as their “swordless battlefield.”

This was no consolation for Zenjirou, however. General Pujol Guillén was currently standing across from him, having boldly engaged him in conversation along with his sister, Fatima. Now also part of the conversation were Count Manuel Márquez and his wife, Octavia, who had joined them to greet the general.

Aura was back at his side as well, her hand on his arm, having followed the count under the pretext of greeting the general herself. Every one of these people would consider the party to be a swordless battlefield.

“Please, allow me to introduce you. This is my sister, Fatima.”

“I am Fatima Guillén, Sir Zenjirou. I am truly honored to be given an audience with you,” said the young, dark-haired girl with a bow. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail, her skin the same darker tone as the majority of the country’s citizenry, and her eyes were jet black, like her hair, and slightly almond-shaped.

Well, she’s a beauty, all right, Zenjirou thought as he looked up at her face when she straightened. And yes, he did indeed have to *look up*.



Fatima's head was higher than his own. She wasn't on a platform or in heels; she was simply taller than he was. Well, her brother was close to two meters in height, so it shouldn't have been surprising that Fatima, too, was tall, having been born to the same parents. She seemed almost certainly over 180 cm, and half of that height could be attributed to her long legs. She may have been lacking in the bust and hips, but her waist was particularly slender and she looked like a model from Zenjirou's world when you combined her features and figure.

"So, you're the general's sister. I can certainly see the resemblance," he commented.

"I am. I hear that quite a lot," the girl replied, her nervous expression breaking into a smile at the comparison. Assuming she wasn't faking the reaction, being similar to her brother must have been something that she was proud of.

Does that mean they have a good relationship? Guess I'll check with Aura later.

"Sir Zenjirou, speaking of the lovely young lady of the Guilléns, Lady Fatima is known throughout the country for her beauty and intelligence. Come to think of it, although I frequent these events, it feels like a rather long time since I have met you directly, milady. Your beauty has only grown," offered the count politely.

"My thanks, Count Márquez. Until recently, I have been apprenticing at the Pernía Estate," she answered, smiling at the praise.

Fatima was supposed to be selling herself to Zenjirou at the moment, so no matter how good the count's words sounded, his presence was nothing but a hindrance and her eyes narrowed unconsciously.

The general, however, had far more years of experience under his belt than she did, and was well aware of the folly of inviting the other man's ire.

"Ahaha, Fatima, you need not look at him like that; the Count is not one to make eyes at you. After all, he has the ultimate lady at his side, who surpasses even you."

The general purposely made light of his sister's hostility rather than ignoring

it, bringing his massive hand up to pat her dainty shoulders.

“B-Brother!” Fatima protested, but fell silent with a stiff expression at his point-blank glare before taking her actions back with a forced smile. “I-Indeed, it seems I cannot help but lose my confidence in front of Lady Octavia.”

“Not at all,” Octavia said, her cheeks reddening slightly. “I am getting on in years, and you are far prettier than I.” At the age of twenty-four, and being married, her behavior could draw criticism from others demanding that she act her age. But her youthful mannerisms still seemed quite appropriate for her, which was likely part of the reason she was so popular with the opposite sex, and also detested like a snake by some of her own.

Fatima, one of those who fell into the latter group, kept her true feelings towards Octavia (“a hag playing at innocent girlhood”) quiet and put on a smile instead. “You are too modest, Lady Octavia.”

Sarcasm was ineffective on this eternal display of innocence, yet taking her comments further would make Fatima look bad, so Octavia was all but socially invincible. While she was as far from meek as one could be, Fatima had enough discretion to avoid picking a fight with the Peerless Lady.

“Well, it may be some time before she can compare with Lady Octavia, but Fatima’s prospects are promising. She is well-acquainted with dance and song, and has experience through her apprenticeship, so she can at the very least act as a lady in waiting.”

The words were clearly directed towards Zenjirou, although the general had ostensibly been speaking to the queen instead.

“Hmm, it is a rarity to see a family such as yours enter into an apprenticeship. I am impressed, though; I may even invite her to act as my own maid in the future,” Aura answered.

“Nothing could please me more, Your Majesty,” he replied after a pause at her smooth interception. Of course, the idea of his sister being the queen’s maid held no real appeal for him. His goal was the possibility of a relationship between Fatima and Zenjirou. However, by social standards, serving the queen was more of an honor than serving the prince consort, so he had lost the thrust of his attack.

Observing their conversation from the sidelines, Zenjirou let out yet another mental sigh. *For real, give me a break...*

Aura's support had allowed him to marshal himself, but a cold sweat that had absolutely nothing to do with the hot night was breaking out beneath his formal wear. The general certainly hadn't outright said, "Take my sister as your concubine," but it was abundantly clear that that was what he was angling for. If Aura hadn't arrived in the middle of the conversation, Zenjirou, in a hurry to get it over with, probably would have said something that could be construed as a commitment without meaning to.

"By the by, what kind of woman *do* you prefer, Sir Zenjirou? Well, of course, Her Majesty comes first, but is there a second or third type you have your eye on?"

And the general plowed onward again. The angle of attack had changed, but not the direction of the conversation.

Asking Zenjirou's preferences while his legal wife stood right next to him took some nerve. The country's royalty wasn't monogamous as a rule, so Zenjirou could hardly apply his own values to others, but surely in any world the inevitable jealousy resulting from multiple relationships would exist?

He resisted the urge to check Aura's expression, lest it gave rise to rumors of him looking to her for cues. But how should he answer? If he could let emotion guide him, he would say something like, "I have my own beautiful wife; I don't need another; don't try to interfere with people's families," but he was well aware that this wasn't the place for it.

"Hmm, I haven't considered it," he murmured rather than letting the silence drag on for too long.

Before General Pujol could pounce on his words, Count Márquez cut in. "Hahaha, I had heard the relationship between Your Majesties was a happy one, but it would appear the rumors were an understatement, if anything. I suppose you are so engrossed with Her Majesty that you have no eyes for other women."

Sinking into a sense of relief, Zenjirou almost instinctively followed his lead. "Come now, Count, refrain from mocking me. You are hardly incorrect, though,

of course.”

“Oh my my, our royal family is assured, how glad this makes me,” the count laughed, affectedly widening his eyes.

Such a blatant maneuver made it clear to the general that Count Márquez was wholeheartedly supporting Zenjirou’s marriage to Aura. For her part, the queen was keeping her peace at his side, but if the general pursued the matter too forcefully, she would counterattack. In other words, he was on his own.

General Guillén didn’t know where he had gone wrong, but he knew that if he continued to push, the risks would outweigh the gains and the whole event carried the possibility of angering Count Márquez. A rumor like “General Pujol has earned the displeasure of Queen Aura and Count Márquez,” could incite their neighboring countries to unrest.

The general wanted real power within “The Great Kingdom of Capua.” He didn’t want to rule over “The Ruins of the Kingdom of Capua.” So he decided it was time to withdraw. He understood that sometimes discretion was the better part of valor, in court just as on the battlefield.

“That is indeed the most important thing,” he said in agreement. “You have a wonderful husband, Your Majesty.” He tapped his sister twice on the back to signify that they were done trying to appeal to him.

“Indeed, he is the best I could ask for. I must be the most fortunate woman in the western countries of Randlion,” Aura replied with a sharp laugh, having inferred that the general was ceasing his efforts for the time being. “I am blessed with capable retainers in all of you, and a splendid husband like Zenjirou here. No, perhaps I am even the most fortunate person on the entire continent.”

“Hahaha, on the whole continent? Such praise makes me a bit uncomfortable.”

“Count, we should avoid growing too conceited. After all, more than half of Her Majesty’s happiness is due to Sir Zenjirou here. Surely we are insignificant in comparison.”

“I see; indeed, compared to Sir Zenjirou, the greatest husband she could ask

for, our loyalty may be a trifling matter.”

The two men continued to probe each for a while longer, but the queen, count, and general refrained from outright attacks, so the event remained relatively peaceful.



“We’re done!” Zenjirou cried, letting a torrent of emotions loose as he collapsed onto the black leather sofa. The hour was late and they had finally returned from the buffet.

The living room was lit by LED lamps, and the ice cooler that the maids had set up to coincide with their return now soothed his body. Coupled with the familiar sensation of the sofa beneath him, he really felt like he was “home.” In other words, the inner palace had come to feel like it really was his own space over the last month or so. He was turning out to be surprisingly adaptable.

“I have put you through a great deal, Zenjirou. And yet, it has shown its worth. Having revealed yourself to the public, the theories that you are in conflict with me, and the rumors of your restricted freedoms, should abate somewhat. Of course, we will never be able to fully eradicate such gossip.”

Aura too sat tiredly on the sofa, still in her orange dress. While she was royalty by birth, and therefore far more used to such affairs than her husband, it by no means meant that her energy was limitless. Zenjirou had enough to deal with just keeping himself in check, but Aura had spent the entire time on guard to support him in addition to her other responsibilities. The task was an arduous one that Zenjirou’s duties could hardly compare to.

Aura rolled her neck, shaking out her hair, still glossy from the perfumed oil, and loosening up her joints.

“Yeah? That’s good, then. I can shut myself away for a bit longer now. Anyway... my eyes still feel weird,” he muttered with a sigh of relief, spreading his arms across the back of the sofa as he blinked hard several times.

He’d been feeling like the backs of his eyes were prickling for some time now. It was probably due to having exhausted them with the unfamiliar light from the chandeliers. However many there were, it was, in the end, nothing more

than candlelight. The illumination produced by a small flame had its limits, and a slight breeze would cause it to flicker as well. So there was not only insufficient lighting, but what light was available wasn't entirely stable. It was then further diffused by the silver reflectors on the chandeliers, which was unsurprisingly bad for his eyes.

But Zenjirou seemed to be the only one who felt that way. As Aura lounged around, she showed no sign of discomfort. It must have been something that Zenjirou felt only because of his familiarity with modern technology.

"Argh, I still can't see right," he grumbled as he pulled off his shoes, having planted himself firmly on the sofa.

The Kingdom of Capua was even hotter than Japan, so going barefoot was culturally acceptable, but not at an event like a dance or buffet. Removing the cloth shoes that he wore indoors, along with the accompanying long socks, he finally allowed his feet to feel the fresh air and let out another sigh.

"So niceee..."

Now that he thought about it, with the exception of the wedding festivities, he hadn't worn anything but slippers since making his preparations to move to his new world. It was a rather belated revelation, but it made him realize just how much he had shut himself away. However different the climate was, he'd spent more than fifteen hours a day in hard shoes and socks for most of his life, yet after a mere month here, wearing cloth shoes for a few hours and wandering the palace had exhausted his legs.

Yeah, I'm going to have to rethink my lifestyle. I'm no princess, and I don't want my feet to end up so soft that I can't walk properly. Not at my age.

As those thoughts swirled around in his head, he stripped off the vest-like garment and opened up the shirt underneath. Sighing in pleasure, he closed his eyes comfortably as the cool air blew against his bare chest.

Zenjirou had a small amount of experience in verbal sparring from his business negotiations, but the fatigue that he felt now didn't even compare. The difference between "royalty" and "employee" hardly needed to be stated, and the sheer disparity between the two had led to him feeling immense pressure.

“Well, whatever, I’ll have a bath soon,” he said, excusing himself as he unfastened the cord-like belt and stripped off his shirt and pants. He knew that he was being slovenly but couldn’t resist the urge to relax his exhausted body.

“I shall avail myself as well,” Aura stated, standing and following his example. She put her hands behind her neck and unknotted the dress, allowing it to fall to the floor with a rustle and bare her skin.

As was the norm for royalty, the maids had always helped her change before, but since she started sharing a bed with Zenjirou, in deference to his dislike of others entering, she had used their help less frequently when it came to undressing.

The two of them were now half-naked, and while their relationship was not new enough for it to embarrass them, it was also not so mature that it didn’t affect them.

“Oh...” Zenjirou whispered, sitting up to direct a look of passion at his wife, despite his earlier exhaustion.

His expression seemed to tickle her fancy, and a smile of satisfaction made its way to her lips. She walked across the room, still partially nude, and reached into the fridge.

“Here,” she offered, removing a pair of chilled towels with practiced movements and tossing one to Zenjirou.

“Mhm, thanks.”

Sweat and dirt aside, a hot towel would have been better for getting rid of the perfumed oil on their hair and necks, but given the temperature, they preferred to avoid the extra heat.

Aura returned to the sofa and remained standing there, wiping the sweat and oil from herself as she spoke to her husband, who was doing the same.

“My apologies for doing this when you are tired, but I wish to ask while your memories remain fresh. How was the evening? Were there any particular individuals among the nobles you met tonight who left an impression?”

Zenjirou removed the towel from his face at her sudden question and fell into

thought. “People who left an impression... Well, I’m sure there were, but the Guillén siblings at the end took the spotlight. Honestly, I don’t really remember anyone else.”

Aura seemed to have expected that response as she smiled and sat down next to him. “I thought so. Well, they are indeed impressive. The brother first, then; what kind of impression did General Pujol Guillén leave?”

“Ah... Well, the general’s impression, hmmm...” he mumbled, glancing uncomfortably at his wife’s penetrating eyes.

He had known that he would have to answer the question, but at the same time, he was scared to. But he could tell from her steady gaze that she wouldn’t let him get away with evasive replies.

He took a deep breath to center himself as he answered honestly, not quite looking at her. “Ah... Well... How should I put it? I’m a guy, right? So, honestly, I don’t think I can give an unbiased opinion about either Pujol Guillén or Rafaello Márquez. I haven’t even met the latter, but I already dislike him...”

Her eyes widened at his almost repentant tone. “I see; those two are a special case for you...ahaha.”

She bit down on the happy laughter that his confession had inspired. Pujol Guillén and Rafaello Márquez were the two men who had been her original candidates for marriage. His bias towards them let her feel her husband’s jealousy and she was aware of her less-than-tasteful delight at that. Behind a man’s jealousy towards other men where his wife was concerned, you could feel a husband’s love. Honestly, it was rather pleasing.

Aura longed to take him in her arms but remembered his dislike of the oil’s scent and so restrained herself. She’d have to resist their usual freedom with contact until they finished their bath. She didn’t want to make him uncomfortable for such trifles.

“Do not concern yourself. I am not careless enough to take your opinions as gospel, so say what you wish,” she pressed, keeping a reasonable distance between them as she sat down on the couch and smiled.

Apparently, they couldn’t do this the normal way, and inferring that, he faced

her and started talking around the point. “Ugh, fine. Well, honestly. Hm, that’s it... My first impression is that General Pujol’s the type to have only enemies and allies.”

“Hmm, only enemies and allies?” She thought she understood his meaning, but his words lacked something, so she looked interestedly at him and asked, “What do you mean by that?”

“Well, you know. He’s sorta super upfront and intimidating, but he doesn’t hide it, right? Plus, he’s blunt as anything about his desires. He doesn’t seem like he’d be afraid of making enemies if it furthered his goals. But he also seems pretty charismatic, so I’d guess he has a lot of allies too. So, yeah, I sorta assumed that most people who get involved with him either like him or hate him. I don’t think most would be able to remain neutral if they interacted with him. That’s the kind of person he struck me as.”

“I see now. I understand what you mean to say,” she said with a nod.

It was unkind to her husband, but he had a greater grasp of the man’s character than she had given him credit for. General Pujol Guillén, with his naked ambition, certainly had his fair share of allies, especially within the military. In turn, he also had a fair share of people who disliked him.

Zenjirou’s estimation of the general being “unafraid to make enemies” was a little unfair, though. In addition to his military background, General Guillén was a distinguished noble and not one to recklessly make enemies in the royal court. He could at least force a smile when faced with someone that he couldn’t make an enemy of.

That could well be the result of Zenjirou’s “bias.” He had unconsciously seen this man, who had held the honor of candidate for her hand, as a rival, and would search for and exaggerate his faults. As Zenjirou himself said, it certainly wasn’t praiseworthy behavior. He was aware of it, though, and as long as he could temper it with good sense, it shouldn’t cause any problems. If it ran the risk of going too far, she would simply have to warn him as his wife.

Besides, having some level of dislike for someone with a deep relationship with the one you loved was natural for humans.

“And what did you think of his sister, Fatima Guillén? I would hear your frank

opinion. You seemed to find her rather charming, or was that a trick of the light, hm?" There was a flash of similar displeasure in her own eyes as she asked the question.

"Huh? Ah, h-hey, Aura?"

Zenjirou sensed his wife's jealousy, hidden by her mischievous grin, as he scooted back on the sofa to look at her.

Chapter 2 — Envoy From the Twin Kingdoms

Several months had passed since Zenjirou's societal debut at the buffet. Even a kingdom like Capua couldn't sustain temperatures of over forty degrees Celsius during the day and over thirty-five degrees at night for an extended period of time, and the highs had finally dropped to just over thirty during the day, and under twenty-five at night.

The recent change had made the days much more bearable, so the fan alone was enough even before night fell, and he could sleep well without taking extensive measures against the heat.

The Capuan kingdom didn't have four distinct seasons like Japan did, but the view from the inner palace windows showed various changes with the passing of time. When Zenjirou first arrived, the flowerbeds were filled with huge red and yellow flowers, but they were now covered in delicate blues and violets, and the shadows were ever so slightly longer. The insects he had been repelling by placing mosquito coils in the windows were noticeably less in number, and the variety of birdsongs that he heard in the twilight hours had changed.

These changes weren't dramatic enough to create the sense of a whole new "season," but you could safely call it something of a seasonal cycle. Whatever the case, the climate was certainly more comfortable now than when he had first arrived.

But he couldn't currently enjoy the nicer weather. He had been shut up in his darkened room since noon, curled up in the fetal position on his bed as he rested. His breath came in short gasps, his cheeks were flushed, and there was sweat pouring from his forehead and neck. Although the heat had abated, the temperature was still in the mid-thirties, yet he was wrapped in a down quilt up to his chin and shuddering violently like he was trying to ward off a chill.

A sound foreign to this world rang out from beneath the covers—an electronic beeping.

"Ugh..." he groaned, barely conscious as he shifted around to pull the

thermometer from under his arm and bring it up to his face.

38.3 °C was displayed on the digital screen... two degrees higher than his usual temperature.



Zenjirou was in bed with a fever.

The first thing Aura did upon receiving the report shortly before lunch was to instruct everyone working in the inner palace to remain there, and to check her own condition. She was worried about her husband, but she was also the monarch, and as such had to prioritize avoiding illness herself rather than helping her spouse.

She halted her work and immediately called for the royal physician, retiring to a private room within the palace.

Soon after, Aura sat in a wicker chair with her mouth open to allow an aging doctor to peer at her throat.

“Very well, that’s enough,” he said, and she closed her mouth.

“Your verdict?”

“You are healthy, or at least you currently show no symptoms of illness, Your Majesty,” he answered with a gentle smile.

“I see; my thanks.” Her face maintained its austere expression as she let out a sigh of relief. Although medical science in this world hadn’t developed anywhere near the level of Earth’s, and the doctor’s judgment was by no means absolute, his tone implied that she could relax for the moment.

With the state of her health confirmed, she could now speak as a wife rather than as a monarch. “Please examine my husband next. He is currently resting in the inner palace.”

One of the few types of men allowed in the inner palace, which was usually off-limits to males, were medical personnel. The kingdom was patriarchal, so there were essentially no female doctors. Therefore, physicians needed to be an exception or residents would be unable to receive consultations or treatments.

“I shall do my utmost for him,” he answered, a gentle smile on his face as he left with her dismissal.

Almost as if it were an exchange, Aura’s secretary, Fabio Deubashe, entered the room as the doctor left.

“Excuse me, Your Majesty. How are you faring?”

“Quite well. I have no problems myself,” Aura replied, smiling at the slender-faced secretary. “Doctor Michel will be examining my husband now. Depending on his illness, I would rather like to use a healing jewel. I would hear your opinion first, however.”

Fabio’s eyebrow twitched at the words “healing jewel,” and he nodded in agreement. “I see. I can make no firm declaration until I hear Doctor Michel’s diagnosis, but if Sir Zenjirou’s disease is potentially fatal, it hardly needs consideration. Our country can ill afford to lose him.”

Healing jewels were items created by a large country at the center of the continent, the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle. The Sharou family’s enchantment magic and the Gilbelle papacy’s healing magic were used to form items that could be considered the crystallization of the two families’ techniques. They could not restore what had already been lost, or repair the senses, but there were very few people who had not survived an injury or ailment when the jewel had been used.

This world had medical knowledge equivalent to that of the Islamic countries during the Middle Ages, but the jewels were something that even those on the cutting edge of twenty-first century science would call a “panacea.” And with the people who were capable of producing such treasures numbering around a dozen, it was little wonder that a single jewel could almost bankrupt a small country.

The Kingdom of Capua reigned supreme over the western part of the continent, and had relatively friendly ties with the Twin Kingdoms, but even they boasted only three such jewels in their possession. These were treasures so great that even if you amassed the incredible riches necessary to buy one, there was no guarantee you would actually be able to obtain it.

“Hearing that from you puts me at ease.” A hint of relief made its way onto

her face. Truthfully, she had immediately considered the option upon hearing of his collapse, but even she was unsure if that was an emotional reaction as his wife or a logical one as the queen.

Considering the situation with a cooler head, it was fair to say that Zenjirou's death would upend the country, leaving her without an heir, and any noble would understand her decision to employ one of those magical items to prevent it. Her inability to calmly consider that before was a sign of just how shaken she was, failing to make such an obvious judgment.

Knowing that she could indeed use the jewel if it came to it, Aura regained her usual level head. She placed her right elbow upon the arm of the chair and propped her chin in her hand.

"He seemed as he ever does when we awoke. I can't help but wonder just what ails him."

"For you to avoid it despite sharing his bed, there is a strong possibility that it is an illness you have suffered before; one that you can only acquire once."

Aura remained with her head in her hand, thinking. An illness that once caught wasn't caught again... In the past, Aura had suffered several illnesses of that type.

"An illness I have had, that you can only get once. One where you may be bright-eyed in the morning yet bedridden shortly after... could it be...?"

Adding that final consideration to Fabio's thoughts, there was only a single illness that she could think of.

Fabio was calmer than she, having arrived at the same conclusion first. "I believe you are correct, Your Majesty," he answered with his usual mask-like expression.

Aura felt the tension drain from her body at that. If she was right, all of her anxiety had been in vain. It wasn't a fatal illness; far from it, in fact. It was more of a benefit.

Before long, her assumptions were confirmed by a report from Doctor Michel as he returned.

“Sir Zenjirou has received The Blessing of the Forest.”

The name of the condition he had uttered was a sickness with a near-zero mortality rate. She resisted the urge to look up at the ceiling in relief and kept her face hard as she replied.

“I see. Good work.”

Her secretary, sharp eyes spotting her consternation, lifted one side of his mouth in a sly smile.



“Aura, what’s The Blessing of the Forest?” Zenjirou asked, still holed up in his blankets as he looked towards Aura, moving only his eyes.

She had finished up her business at the palace early in order to return and care for him. The evening was just beginning, but as he’d had the shutters closed all day, he didn’t know what was going on outside. Only one of the lamps was lit to make it easier for him to rest, and even that was covered by a thick cloth and umbrella to dim the brightness.

Aura was sitting in the gloomy room, in a chair next to the bed, wiping the sweat from him assiduously.

“To put it simply,” she answered, “it is a long-standing disease endemic to the area. It is less than virulent, and even those infected, excluding infants and the elderly, seldom perish. Further, not only does one gain immunity after contracting it, but those who do become immune also inexplicably experience less severe symptoms should they become afflicted with another type of disease, so it came to be known as The Blessing of the Forest.”

Zenjirou managed to parse her words, despite his brain not working quite right due to the fever, and he couldn’t help but muse, “Whoa... if I went back to Earth with these antibodies, I wonder if I’d get the Nobel Prize...”

There were similar diseases on Earth, like measles and chickenpox, which you would only get once in your life, but creating antibodies that had such dramatic effects on other pathogens was an utter fantasy. Above all else, the best news to Zenjirou was that “people seldom perished.” He had been wracked with fear over this otherworldly disease, and his face now relaxed as he managed to

forget the pain in his joints.

“Right, then I just need to rest and heal up... how long?”

“The fastest recovery takes three days, although it may take as long as seven.”

So, it would probably be around five days before he would fully recover. It wasn't that he couldn't force himself to get up and move, but thinking of spending the better part of a week in this state was galling. Because of the ache in his joints, he couldn't find a comfortable position to lie in, and the fever had him dripping with sweat, but his throat was so swollen that even drinking water was painful. Sleeping made it easier, but the discomfort and pain meant that sleep was slow to come. He felt like he had a severe cold.

Do people really “seldom die” when they're in this state? It seems like the level of development here would result in many people dying from it, he thought through the seething fever.

The reason that most people in Japan wouldn't die from having a thirty-eight degree fever for several days was because of doctors and medicine, and a nourishing diet being the norm. Zenjirou felt that his current state would be plenty fatal to a malnourished lower-class citizen.

And that impression was no mistake. The reason this “blessing” was spoken of so lightly was because it was far less severe if it was caught while one was young. If someone nearby were to exhibit symptoms of the disease, parents with young children would purposely take them to “receive their blessing.”

Unfortunately, there were boys and girls who did indeed succumb to it and lost their lives, but that was unavoidable, and anyone who did so wouldn't have made it to adulthood regardless... or so the parents told themselves.

Of course, Zenjirou was rather removed from the circumstances of the lower classes at the moment.

“Speaking of your illness, the maids are worried. Will you not consider allowing them entry while you are indisposed? That would set me at ease as well,” Aura said, almost in remembrance.

Zenjirou curled up further at that, a rare unhappy expression on his face. “Ah,

well, I'd rather not. To be honest, I have a feeling I wouldn't get better with people around..."

For her part, Aura was bewildered by his answer, but continued to try to persuade him. "But, being in this condition, taking care of your meals and other needs will be difficult, no? You need care."

She had made time to help for the moment, but she had a country to run and this was not a duty befitting of her status. Normally, the care of royalty was not administered by other royals, but by the help.

"Yeah... right..." Zenjirou prevaricated, seeming strangely reluctant to accept her suggestion.

"Zenjirou?" she prompted him.

"You see," he managed, straining his throat to murmur, "I'm pretty tetchy when I'm ill. I get nasty and selfish if I don't keep my guard up. And I don't wanna have to do that... so I don't want people around..."

People's personalities changing while they were ill wasn't unusual. A weakened body had some sort of effect on the mind, and many who were normally timid would tend to want company while unwell.

In Zenjirou's case, it made him more aggressive. He would kvetch about anything and everything—that his soup was too hot, or the towels someone was wiping him with were too warm. Even the fact that there were healthy people in existence while he was feeling so awful became a source of irritation. He'd caused a lot of problems for his parents each time he'd gotten a fever as a child.

Of course, as a grown man now, he wasn't so weak-willed that he would bring that aggression to bear on his surroundings constantly, regardless of his suffering body and mind. Even so, constantly worrying about repressing that aggression was tiring. So he preferred to have no one around at all, even if things were a bit more difficult for him that way. He didn't even want Aura there, not for the moment, at least. Being so childish and selfish towards his lovely wife... it would make his mental recovery take significantly longer than his physical one.

“I’ll be fine... I can at least change my clothes on my own, and I’ll ring the bell if I need to use the toilet...” he managed in a weak voice.

“Mgh, but...” Aura was conflicted. She wanted to say that dealing with their master’s displeasure was simply part of the servants’ jobs. However, over the last few months, she had managed to understand a large part of his moral code. Zenjirou was a man who felt that it was utterly inexcusable to cause unreasonable trouble to anyone. And the status of the people in question was irrelevant.

Nobles were one thing, Aura felt, but he was the same even with the lowliest of servants. Considering that, she could see that if he let loose on the maids now, it would cause him distress later.

“Very well. I shall tell them to keep their visitations to a minimum,” she allowed after a brief period of thought.

“Mm... thanks.”

Her continuation was half-unconscious. “It will soon be time for dinner. Is there anything you wish to eat?” she asked casually.

Zenjirou, his mind still hazy, reflexively let his actual desires slip out. “Okayu... I want okayu with dried plums or eggs and soy sauce.” Okayu was a porridge for when you were ill, a well-known association for anyone in Japan. However, the dish did not exist here in Capua.

“Ohkayu? What is that? And the dried plums also? I know of eggs, but what is soi sauce?”

Aura’s puzzlement made it obvious even to Zenjirou’s fever-riddled brain. He hadn’t gotten through to her. From her reaction, he could see that the automatic translation through the soul of language hadn’t worked, and at the very least there was no matching equivalent of dried plums and soy sauce here.

He smiled weakly at her. “Mm, I don’t feel up to explaining it now... later. Whatever you bring’s fine; I’ll eat anything.”

He remembered that his aunt’s homemade dried plums were in the fridge, but they would be pointless on their own. They had wheat in Capua, but not the custom of making it into porridge, so even if he had the kitchens concoct a

wheat porridge specially for him, and added the plums, there was no guarantee it would taste right. It would be better to wait until he was well before he started trying to invent new foods.

Guess I should get a bit more serious about all that once I'm better...

"Very well," Aura answered, standing lithely from the chair, "I shall have the staff prepare something light on your stomach."

"Mm, I'll look forward to it..."

Before she left, she wiped off his forehead once more as they spoke. Then the door closed with a thump and Zenjirou was left alone in the gloom.

"Ugh..."

He fumbled around off the side of the bed, grabbing a bottle of water that had been boiled and allowed to cool, and raised it to his mouth.

"Guh..."

Just swallowing the lukewarm liquid made his throat twinge, but he had to replenish what he'd lost through sweating. He knew how dangerous dehydration would be, so he bore with the discomfort and swallowed.

"Phew..."

He had consumed about half the bottle by the time he re-capped it and put it back on the side table. The bottle was part of the survival rations he had prepared for his second summoning. In Japan, it would have gone out with the recyclable trash long ago, but the small container was a treasure here. It was light, and there was no risk of it breaking if you dropped it. It was exceedingly easy to use and without it, even drinking water would have been more of a chore. He regularly washed it out but wasn't sure how hygienic that was, so he doubted it was something he could use forever. Still, it was very handy for these kinds of situations.

Having quenched his thirst in exchange for the pain, Zenjirou collapsed back into the pillow, burying his face in it as he once more became aware of the sweat soaking him.

Ugh, what am I on about, asking for okayu in another world, seriously? Am I

five?!

He was glad that Aura was insightful and understanding. If she was still there, he'd probably be asking for canned peaches next. While Zenjirou didn't rate himself particularly highly, he never thought he would be so lacking in self-restraint that he would let his selfishness emerge like that, and all joking aside, his self-loathing was reaching critical levels.

Ugh, damn it all; I need to get better quickly or I'm gonna die mentally...

Still face-down on the pillow, he lamented his earlier slip of the tongue. However, there was perhaps a silver lining—that self-hatred distracted him enough that he almost forgot about the fever and pain in his joints. And before he knew it, he'd fallen asleep.

Meanwhile, Aura was in the living room, and her face currently carried an equal amount of self-reproach.

“Honestly, how much mind have I even paid my husband before now?”

Deep creases formed around her flared nostrils as she collapsed into the sofa with a soft thud.

She let out a sigh, her anger abating as she settled into the cushions, and this time she spoke with a much sadder expression.

“Ohkayu and plooms, and soi sauce? The soul of language does not function with those words, so I suppose I cannot even search for them.”

She couldn't prepare the food that her husband actually wanted to eat while he was ill. Furthermore, she didn't even know what kind of food he preferred, and her self-reproach grew at the thought.

“An unfamiliar land, strange clothes, and food that is foreign to him...”

Once more imagining the situation he was in, her heart grew heavier. During the war, Aura herself had been part of the expeditionary force, so she knew those feelings well. She knew just what kind of influence being unable to eat food that suited a person's palette could have. That influence was even stronger when one was wounded or weakened. The words on the lips of

soldiers on the verge of death, after those of their families, were of their favorite foods. Any officer knew that.

“So, all in all, I am simply heaping discomfort upon my husband.”

Her self-blame was so strong that the complaints just fell from her lips, despite knowing that they were untrue. She had no recollection of coercing him, and every choice had been made by Zenjirou himself.

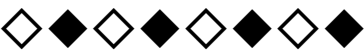
Thinking back with a clearer mind, she knew that Zenjirou had shown no real displeasure with his life in the inner palace, or regrets about his decision. As far as she knew, he was truly enjoying himself... particularly when they lay with each other. On those nights, he had an expression of utter joy and fulfillment. That much she could say with certainty.

Aura leaned back into the sofa, as if to shake off her melancholy. “He is certainly not unhappy. I am merely letting my thoughts run in a bad direction. Still...”

As she trailed off, she considered her actions again, from a slightly different perspective.

“Perhaps I should aim to grant some of his wishes as best I can. Should he long too much to return home, he may draw away and shatter the kingdom’s peace.”

She skillfully put her emotions as his wife into the terms of her duties as queen as she went over everything carefully in her head.



On this continent, there were creatures called dwarf wyverns. As the name implied, they were the smallest among the soar drakes (a general name for flying lizards). These drakes, roughly the same size as crows, were the only ones capable of flight among the four types of drakes that humanity had domesticated.

The other three types were dash drakes, burden drakes, and food drakes. Each of them supported different aspects of life and were all important animals that the locals couldn’t do without. Specifically, dash drakes were used for transport, burden drakes were for labor, and food drakes were for eating.

Comparing them to Earth animals, dash drakes would be like horses, burden drakes like cows, and food drakes like pigs, more or less.

So, these dwarf wyverns were of use in another way: carrying information. Compared to the normal movement of information, which was generally performed by a courier carrying a message by way of dash drake, there was a much higher risk of some accident preventing its arrival, but the advantage of the dwarf wyvern was in its overwhelming speed. What would take a series of couriers working in a relay without rest for five days wouldn't take half a day for a dwarf wyvern.

At noon that day, one such creature was sent from the eastern border to the royal palace.

"A report from the eastern border?" Aura asked, looking up curiously at Fabio from where she sat in her office.

"Indeed; a dwarf wyvern has just arrived. Here." He placed three wooden tubes each the size of a finger onto the table before her. The contents of each tube were likely identical, as it was common to send multiple wyverns with the same message in case one was lost or preyed upon by bigger lizards.

Aura picked one up and removed its cap. There was a thin sheet of drake parchment inside. The general at the border had felt the need to send their valuable dwarf wyverns, so there must have been some urgency to it.

With a sense of foreboding, she scanned the letter before letting out a sigh.

"Your Majesty?"

She simply held out the parchment in silence. Dwarf wyverns held a greater risk of being intercepted in exchange for their overwhelming speed, so even in an emergency, they were usually restricted to carrying information that was not top secret. There was nothing abnormal about Fabio, her confidant, taking the letter and reading it himself.

"Excuse me," he said as he took the scrap, a muscle jumping in his cheek as his eyes flickered over the text.

"At dawn, Princess Isabella of the Twin Kingdoms and her entourage arrived at the Eastern Fort with three-hundred escorts. They sought entry to the country

under the terms of the treaty, and were permitted on condition that they disarm in the city. Further, three-hundred cavalry are accompanying their party as escorts.”

The date and the general’s signature were below. As Fabio read the message several times over, Aura checked the other two containers just in case, but they were indeed identical.

After making sure that he hadn’t missed anything, her secretary spoke flatly. “A visit from Princess Isabella? Perhaps one of the neighboring countries’ royals or nobles has someone gravely ill in need of her services?”

“That is likely. A direct visit from her would require an astounding amount of money,” Aura nodded.

Isabella Gilbelle. As her name indicated, she was from one of the royal families of the Twin Kingdoms at the center of the continent; the princess of the Gilbelle Papacy.

Although she was a princess, the current head of the family had held the position for over sixty years. Isabella herself was in her forties and had three children, but the thing most worthy of mention was that she was one of only five users of healing magic in the papacy.

There were many people who visited the Twin Kingdoms simply because the Gilbelle papacy was blessed with healing magic. However, as one might expect, very few on the brink of death would make it as far as the capital. Therefore, when someone of note was immobile due to illness, a member of the papacy was sent for in exchange for an amount of money that would make the treasurers weep.

“And only three hundred with her as an escort,” she continued. “They must have a large number of magic tools with them.”

“That is likely true. We do not know which country they are making for, but we shall remain on the lookout.”

“Investigate it at once; there may have been a change in government in one of our neighboring countries.”

“Understood, Your Majesty.”

It was not unusual for the Gilbelles to have an immense number of guards when visiting patients in other kingdoms. The distance involved and the current state of their relations with their neighbors would determine their exact numbers, but the minimum was usually a thousand-strong unit of elites.

The seemingly excessive guard was a logical choice, if one considered the facts. The family were the *only* users of healing magic in the world, so of course there was a risk that another royal or noble would want to keep them close at hand once they had been plucked from the abyss. There had actually been instances where the healer who had come to perform the magic had been confined with an excuse such as “They wish to seek refuge in my country” being sent back to their home country.

The kingdoms had learned from those experiences, and now whenever the Gilbelles went abroad, they brought sufficient manpower to inflict no small amount of damage if the country they were in betrayed them. The soldiers were always armed and their presence was required for any trip a member of the royal family took. The travel and lodging expenses incurred by such a crowd were also the responsibility of the country that had summoned them.

However, the larger a military group was, the slower it would travel as well, and there were cases where the person they were meant to save had become too far gone during their long march. The compromise in such situations were the knights carrying the magic tools that Aura had mentioned.

The other royal family in the Twin Kingdoms, the Sharous, had the ability to create magic items, which were used to arm the knights, making them equal to thousands of normal men without. This led to a huge reduction in the size of the accompanying guard, and a commensurate increase in their speed, which in turn allowed someone to surmise that the patient they were on the way to see must be in critical condition.

“Regardless,” Fabio said, “it would seem that the treatment has been completed and she is now returning home. Shall I adjust your schedule so that you may cast space-time magic?”

“Yes, please do,” she answered with a slight sigh, prompting him to nod.

The reason for Isabella’s visit to the kingdom was clear—she wished for Aura

to use her teleportation magic to return them to the Twin Kingdoms immediately. Teleportation would save them the travel time for the return trip, and would also remove the risk of a journey on foot. The spell was a grand working of magic requiring a long chant and an astonishing amount of power, so it wasn't easily used, but Aura couldn't refuse if the princess had personally requested it.

Still, it was an opportunity to have the healer owe her a favor, and ordinarily, she would have welcomed it.

"The problem is my husband," she murmured, resting her chin in her hand thoughtfully. With Zenjirou having contracted the Blessing of the Forest, he was going to be bedridden for several days. "If she is at the eastern fortress, it should be about five days before she arrives, correct?"

"Approximately, yes. Depending on how long the illness ails him, Sir Zenjirou may not recover in time."

Recovery from the disease usually took between three and seven days, and Zenjirou had relatively heavy symptoms, so he might well still be in bed by the time Isabella arrived.

A scowl made its way onto her face. "Curses. I would rather no one from outside the country enters his room. We should prepare another room, perhaps, and have him stay there during her visit, if worst comes to worst."

The room that he usually resided in was filled with the electronics he had brought from his own world. It was unlikely that there would be any immediate repercussions if those devices were discovered, but she wanted to keep them as secret as possible.

The simplest method would be to have Zenjirou move to another room for the duration of Isabella's stay. The inner palace had originally been constructed to house several women, but the only people living there at present were her husband and herself, so there were several empty bedchambers.

"That would be sufficient. There is no need to refuse an audience with her entirely," Fabio agreed.

The disease was not fatal, and it was better to let it pass naturally as it

strengthened the body against other diseases in the process. However, there were simpler healing magics such as stamina restoration and mental recovery that would ease his suffering in the meantime. If Princess Isabella were to express an interest in treating him, there was no reason to turn her down.

“This would mean he could be meeting her whilst suffering from fever...”

Zenjirou had admitted himself that, while unwell, he grew more sharp-tongued, and his normally astonishing logic and self-restraint were certainly not at their usual levels just now. While Isabella may have looked like a slightly attractive middle-aged woman, she had worked as a healer for close to thirty years, and was a full member of the papal family. She wouldn’t take the rudeness of a patient personally, but at the same time, she wouldn’t pass up the opportunity to use it to gather information.

“I do hope that nothing too troublesome occurs,” Aura muttered to herself, resigned to the fact that an issue of *some* kind was likely inevitable.



Six days later, Aura had arranged for Princess Isabella to be shown to a room within the palace, where they could have a private discussion.

Isabella’s party had arrived the evening prior. Their public greetings had been dealt with during the noon audience earlier, but neither of them could speak freely in public.

“It has been some time, Queen Aura,” Isabella opened with. “I wish to first offer my congratulations on your marriage.”

The slightly plump middle-aged woman was sitting on a leather sofa with her knees together as she gave a refined bow of her head. During the official audience, they had both been confined by their extravagant formal wear, but they were now wearing light, relatively plain dresses. Aura’s was a crimson, sleeveless affair, and Isabella’s was a white, comparatively airy gown with short sleeves.

In Capua, white dresses were the purview of girls and brides. They were items that women of a certain age normally refrained from wearing, but in the Twin Kingdoms, white was emblematic of the Gilbelle family. Outside of extenuating

circumstances, the papal family's outfits were all based on the color.

The whole shape of the outfit differed significantly from Capuan examples as well. Here, long dresses with slits or long wrap-skirts were the norm, whereas Isabella's dress flared out and had a small opening in the chest, contrasting with the Capuan fashion of having an open neck that put the wearer's cleavage on display.

"Indeed, it was completed with no notable incidents. The celebratory gifts from the Twin Kingdoms were greatly appreciated," Aura answered. Rather than bowing her head, she straightened and threw her chest out.

Isabella was over a decade her senior, but given her position as head of state, Aura was overwhelmingly higher in status. Compared to her, Isabella was merely one of countless lesser royals.

The princess lifted a hand to her lips and giggled elegantly. It made her look like more of a high-class merchant than royalty.

"As long as you appreciated them, Your Majesty. Ordinarily, I would have liked to come and offer my felicitations in person, but there was an urgent matter that came to light and prevented me. I shall endeavor to atone for that in the future."

"And there would be no possibility of such 'atonement' taking the form of information on this urgent matter, I presume?"

"There would not," she answered without a sign of hesitation at the provocation. "I'm afraid it falls under the Healer's Confidence, so I beg your pardon on the matter." The words were a firm denial wrapped in a soft smile and gentle tone.

It was only to be expected. When, who, where, what... these questions on the illnesses that the family cured were not open topics of discussion. If the healers were to make such details publicly available, no one would be likely to request their services. There wasn't a single upper-class family in this world that had a closet free of skeletons, after all.

It was perhaps a less strictly defined concept, but the Gilbelle family had morals similar to the modern rules of doctor-patient confidentiality. Aura had

known from the beginning that there was no chance of the princess agreeing, so she quickly moved on.

“A shame. Ah, I have an item that I wish you to examine.” With an expression of suddenly having remembered something, she rang a bell on the table.

Fabio immediately appeared, likely having been waiting directly outside. “You called, Your Majesty?”

“I did. Bring the rings, along with the rest.”

“At once.”

“Rings?” Isabella asked.

“Indeed,” Aura smiled meaningfully back at her. “My husband’s country has a custom where the man offers a matching ring to his wife as a wedding gift. I have the ring, so I wish to make it into some type of magic tool.”

“My, how wonderful. I shall make it a personal responsibility and offer my own endorsement.”

“Please do.”

As the conversation progressed, a knock came at the door, and Fabio returned with a silver tray in his right hand.

“Excuse me, I have brought the items,” he said.

“Wonderful. Leave them there.”

“Of course.” He placed the tray on the table between the two women before offering a bow and leaving.

Atop the tray were two rings and two cloth bags. Isabella looked curiously at the pouches, but her eyes widened in shock at the rings.

“These...” she murmured with genuine surprise.

“Feel free to handle them. I wish to hear your candid opinion.”

Taking the queen at her word, Isabella took one of the rings and held it up to the sunlight streaming in from the window. The otherworldly gold and diamonds sparkled as they were bathed in the golden beams.

The ring she had chosen was the one Zenjirou had given to Aura. The band was wide with jewels embedded within. There were three small diamonds cut into a brilliant pattern and set into the yellow gold.

Zenjirou had actually wanted to follow the clerk's recommendation to use the stronger-colored pink diamonds to suit Aura's hair and eyes, but they were exceedingly expensive. He could have afforded some with a reddish tinge but had decided to go with the standard colorless diamonds if he was already compromising on the look.

"Magnificent... are these crystals?"

"No, I am told they are diamonds."

"Diamonds?! Fashioned in this way?"

Isabella's impropriety was only natural. Diamonds existed in this world, but the techniques used to shape them did not. Any diamonds they had nowadays had been cut with magic by a great earth mage in the past. And that was to say nothing of the fact that even if said mage were resurrected, it would be impossible for them to calculate the angles of incidence and refraction needed to cut the gems into such brilliantly shining polyhedrons.

Back on Earth, gem cutting had progressed as precision engineering did. Even borrowing the rule-breaking nature of magic, it would be impossible to replicate the process here. The same could be said for the ring itself.

"How were these lines carved so finely?"

The rings, highly fashionable, were simple but had regular lines carved into the body, like cross-hatching in drawings. Isabella's country was the preeminent expert on jewelry, but would be unlikely to have anyone who could reproduce such craftsmanship.

From an artistic standpoint, the jewelry of this world was as good as Earth's, but in terms of pure technique, the rings were irreplicable. It was like telling the world's best calligrapher to produce more uniform characters than a computer.

Isabella's reaction was completely in line with Aura's expectations, and she breathed a mental sigh of relief. *A discerning eye inevitably finds itself lighting up at the sight of these gifts.*

Aura's own reaction had been much the same when she had first seen the rings the morning after the wedding. The manufacturing was too precise, and the three stones shone from every angle.

Aura had persuaded Zenjirou not to wear them as a rule. They shone too brightly, and if she wore hers, sharp-eyed nobles would notice and ask after its provenance, which would undoubtedly lead to unwanted attention coming to rest upon her husband. At the time, such excessive attention might have forced them to move up his debut before he was ready.

Aura had felt at the time that she may have been overthinking things, but seeing Isabella's reaction confirmed that her concerns had not been too far off.

The princess finally noticed Aura's expression and laughed off her initial reaction, putting the ring back onto the tray. "Ah... excuse me, Your Majesty, I was taken in."

"Do not concern yourself; they are indeed magnificent. It is those two items that I wish to have made into magic tools."

"Yes, with such wonderful jewels, I do believe the Sharou family will be more than willing to work on them."

The objects most frequently made into magic tools were weapons and jewelry. That relationship meant the wielders of enchantment magic, the Sharou family, had a good eye for such things. There was little doubt their reactions would be even stronger than Isabella's.

"I have made no firm determinations of the variety of magic I would like to have them imbued with. Do you have any suggestions?" Aura asked.

Isabella rested her round chin in her hand and thought. "Well, then. However wondrous they are, they are small, so it would be advisable to refrain from any great workings. Perhaps something basic such as a flame dart, fire resistance, or possibly an option to conjure water?" she suggested.

"I would not dare to hope for a spell on the level of greater regeneration, but would a form of health recovery be possible?"

"If you were willing to allow the ring to crumble after only five uses, it would be."

“Hm...”

They spoke for a while longer, but there was nothing that seemed to fit just right. Still, Isabella would be staying in Capua for a time, so there was no need to decide then and there.

The conversation plateaued, and Isabella’s eyes were drawn to the pouches on the tray. “That reminds me, Your Majesty, what is within these bags?”

Aura picked up the larger of the two and replied with a smile. “Ah, these are also my husband’s. I thought I would ask you to appraise them while you are here. Your Highness, would you spare a few words to evaluate some jewels?”

“Well, I am more knowledgeable than average considering my position in the Twin Kingdoms, but I am not as well-informed as the Sharou family,” she admitted. Despite her answer, her gaze was intrigued as Aura proffered the bag.

As the princess had inferred from Aura, the contents consisted of other jewels... ones from the same country those wondrous rings had come from, which made them all the more interesting.

Feeling the other’s gaze on her fingers, Aura opened the bag and fished a single item out, placing it onto the tray with a *clack*.

It was a marble. Clear glass confined a strand of colored glass—the simplest, most common type. It rolled across the tray.

The sparkling orb caught Isabella’s eyes, which widened even more than when she had seen the rings. If her surprise at the wedding gifts had been something she hadn’t felt the need to hide, the expression she wore now was one that she couldn’t have hidden if she’d tried. A look of chagrin appeared on her face for a split second, before she quickly covered it with her usual mild smile.

“Ahem... excuse me, this is rather a surprise. What is it?” she asked in astonishment, her gaze still fixed on the marble atop the tray. This “astonishment” was not the same naked wonder as when she had first beheld it a moment before; it was now a facade of surprise.

Quietly wondering about Isabella’s initial reaction, which had far surpassed

her expectations, Aura carefully concealed her thoughts. “They are truly a shock, are they not? These too are items that my husband brought with him. They are, of course, neither crystal nor diamond. They are apparently something called glass, considerably more fragile than crystals and easier to break.”

As the word “fragile” passed the queen’s lips, Isabella jolted back from where she had reached for the marble, prompting a slight smile.

“Ah, their fragility is more along the lines of a drop from a greater height onto a hard surface being able to break them. There is no fear of damaging them during normal handling, and the carpet here removes much of the risk from falls,” she explained.

“I see. May I pick it up?”

“Please do. Take your time to look it over.”

With Aura’s permission, Isabella gently gripped the marble between three fingers, holding it up to the light in the same way she had done with the ring. She let out a breath of wonder. “Superb...”

“I ask you this frankly, Princess Isabella. If this were to be on the market, what value would you attach to a single piece?”

The fact that Aura had some ulterior motive was surprisingly clear as Isabella brought her eyes back to focus on the queen. She temporized with a clearing of her throat before answering with a question in turn. “Are you saying that you intend to sell these jewels?”

“I am not; they are my husband’s, after all,” she answered the deadly serious question with a shake of her head, “I could never simply sell them off. However, these have never existed in our world, so he has granted several of them to me to ascertain their value.”

“Ah, I understand,” the princess nodded.

Things like jewelry, which had no day-to-day life or militaristic value, had no fixed worth, and that was particularly true of items like these glass orbs, which had never been seen in this world. Even if Aura and Zenjirou had considered them priceless, if they couldn’t obtain some type of external appraisal, the

objects would have no true value here.

With that in mind, Aura's idea to let one or two out into the wider world and establish their value was not a strange decision. Nor was Isabella a poor choice to receive such an opinion from. Even so, the princess seemed unable to believe her ears.

"I see. Assuming I were able to purchase one... I would pay thirty gold coins."

Thirty gold coins. Aura was aghast at hearing such an unexpected amount, but refused to show it on her face. "Is that right?"

A short silence fell before Isabella shrugged in slight resignation. "Very well. Fifty gold coins, then. I do not believe anyone would pay a greater amount."

At some point, Isabella's tone had shifted from a hypothetical discussion to a business negotiation, and she had added twenty extra coins to the value. This time, it was Aura who couldn't hide her surprise. She had thought the offer of thirty coins excessive, and her innocent questioning had led to a further increase in the price.

Had Isabella taken it as her trying to drive a hard bargain? She looked searchingly at her companion, the latter's elegant features staring back at her with a soft smile.

Aura's thoughts solidified at that smile. *No, I find it impossible to believe the princess would misread such a blatant tone of doubt. So, the increase was purposeful. What could her intentions be in putting such an absurd price on a single item?*

Fifty gold coins was extraordinary. As a reference, a low-class dash drake would cost a mere three coins, whereas one that had been trained for combat and cavalry use would be ten, and so on. A lower noble's estate—one who held no additional territory—would sell for between fifty and one hundred gold coins. No matter how rare and wonderful the marbles were, such a valuation was simply absurd.

Of course, jewels commanding such a value were not entirely rare. There were even items out there that were an order of magnitude more expensive. However, Aura hadn't viewed these marbles as being on that level. Something

was certainly strange about the offer.

She moved to gather more information, taking several beads from the other pouch and placing them onto the tray. “And these? I believe they are rather interesting also.”

The new beads were vivid reds, blues, and greens, their crisp colors offering plenty to draw the eye. And yet Isabella’s reaction was much less dramatic this time.

“My, these are wonderful as well. They are all the same shape and even have a small hole in the middle. I’m sure there are multiple interesting uses for them.” Her praise and the enraptured look on her face were not false, but there was no sign of the same shock in her eyes as with the marbles.

“Yes, they are beautiful, are they not? Intriguing too, I could have a thread run through them to use as a necklace. What value would you see as appropriate for these?”

“Let me see; they are clearly of high quality, and considering their size... I would say ten silvers each,” she concluded, her rounded chin in hand.

The value this time was not too far from Aura’s own estimations. While exact rates were bound to vary based on location and time period, a single gold piece was generally worth about one hundred silvers, so a single marble at fifty gold coins would be equivalent to five thousand silvers. On the other hand, the beads would be ten apiece. In other words, Isabella felt that the marbles were five hundred times more valuable than the beads.

There was certainly a difference in the weight of the items, but Aura couldn’t help but feel the value given for the marbles was extreme. The beads being in accordance with her pricing expectations while the marbles were suggested to be far more valuable made the contrast all the more conspicuous.

And yet, her unflinching valuations would imply this is a clear indication of her intentions... perhaps a sort of test?

“I see. That will be a very useful reference. I would like to offer you one for your troubles, Princess. Feel free to pick whichever one you like,” Aura told her, deliberately picking up the bag of marbles and tipping them onto the tray.

Dozens rolled across the metal surface.

“Oh my!”

Her gaze firmly upon Isabella’s startled face as the latter put her hands to her mouth in surprise, Aura grinned. “Go ahead. You need not restrain yourself; inspect them as you wish and choose any one that you prefer.”

The marbles crowding the tray ranged from the standard orbs containing colored glass to those with frosted surfaces, those with pretty marbling across the surface, and even one with a simple map of the Earth fashioned into it.

Piled together in that way, they were such a sight that it was no exaggeration to call them jewels. Isabella seemed to realize that Aura’s eyes were upon her, and after a period of silence she shrugged lightly and plucked one from the group.

“I shall take you at your word, then, and have this one.” The marble in her hand was plain and nearly transparent. “And,” she continued, “concerning the remainder?”

“I understand,” Aura answered. “It all depends on my husband’s decision, but if he chooses to relinquish them, you shall be the first I inform.”

“My thanks.” Isabella seemed satisfied with the assurance as she bowed politely. She then glanced towards the light streaming in from the windows, and with an expression of realization, continued. “Ah, forgive my rudeness, Your Majesty, I grew too invested in our discussion. As thanks for this treasure, would you permit me to examine His Majesty? I believe I may be able to aid him.”

“Of course. I would welcome it, in fact. I cannot imagine anyone on the continent refusing a visit from the Gilbelle family. As soon as the preparations have been completed, I shall have you guided to the inner palace. Until then, please wait in the neighboring room.”

“Very well. Until then.”

The conversation concluded with a pleased look on Isabella’s face as she stood elegantly, gave another small bow, and retired to the offered room.



“So, Princess Isabella valued the larger, round jewels at fifty gold coins and the small ones with holes at ten silvers each. I would hear your thoughts,” Aura said, finishing her account of the conversation to Fabio, who had taken the princess’s place.

“Fifty gold? I feel that may be a tad high,” the secretary remarked, an eyebrow rising.

“Fabio,” answered the queen, unable to hide her displeasure, “be direct with me. Do you truly think fifty gold is an amount where the phrase ‘a tad’ is appropriate?”

“Excuse me; allow me to correct myself. That offer is far beyond my wildest expectations,” he apologized, not showing a hint of fear at his superior’s mood, although he gave a slight bow with his correction.

Aura herself seemed to have no intention of quibbling over semantics. A calm expression soon made its way back onto her face as she looked up at the stoic secretary from where she sat on the sofa and continued, “It was strange. In fact, she had a much stronger reaction to them than even the rings.”

The wedding rings were finely crafted, with diamonds cut using techniques that didn’t exist in this world. Anyone could see at a glance how beautiful they were. Surely even those with no knowledge of jewels would place more value on the rings than the marbles.

“Her candidness is quite baffling,” he agreed.

If Aura had to judge one way or another, she would say that Isabella was a good person, but the princess had spent over forty years as a member of one of the largest country’s royal families, navigating the choppy waters of court life. Such blatant greed would have seen her taken advantage of, and she would have been well aware of that. Yet she had still offered the ridiculous sum of fifty gold.

“The princess is not known for flights of whimsy, nor is she known for spending freely. Therefore, the valuation must be a fair estimate,” Aura mused.

“Perhaps she was expecting competition. I could understand her actions

should she be aware of someone who would pay just as much, or possibly even more, if they knew of these jewels.”

“Regardless, she does not appear to see them as simple jewels,” Aura emphasized, garnering a nod of confirmation from the secretary.

“That is certain. I could not begin to fathom her intentions, but we should consider the items to have some exceedingly useful utility.”

“Hmm...” the queen murmured, folding her arms and recalling Isabella’s response.

When Aura had spread the marbles across the tray, Isabella’s gaze had been focused on the transparent, colorless one from the beginning. If it was no coincidence or misdirection, there may well be some value to its particular appearance. Although in that case, surely standard crystals would be equally usable.

“Curse it all; we have insufficient information. This is nothing more than guesswork. I suppose we shall have to ask the old man’s thoughts.”

“That would be wise. Lord Espiridion may well have knowledge that we lack.”

Espiridion was the head court mage, and in addition to being the foremost expert on magic within the kingdom, he was also an erudite sage. A man of his years would likely have some inkling of what was going on.

“Convey this to him, and inform him that we wish to borrow his knowledge tonight.”

“It shall be done.”

“Still, fifty gold for a single jewel. If they are all of the same value then my husband has close to two thousand five hundred gold in assets.”

Such a fortune could fund the construction of a small fort. Even from a royal’s perspective, it was a significant sum.

“Indeed. There is a danger in liquidating them before we understand what value Her Highness sees in them, but should they cause us no harm, I believe it would be best to allow Sir Zenjirou to do as he wishes.”

“Certainly, and I would like to secure the Twin Kingdoms as a business

partner. After all, they pay in newly minted coins.”

“If you would permit me the slight discourtesy, I would like Sir Zenjirou to exchange those gold coins for the many silvers in our coffers.”

“That would be rather *too* frank,” Aura said with a sharp smile at the secretary’s comment.

Currently, there were only two countries on the Southern Continent that were minting gold coins. One was the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle. Unfortunately, The Kingdom of Capua was not the other. The country had no gold mines, and they could only gather what was possible through panning for gold from the rivers. It wasn’t enough to regularly mint new coins.

Instead, they had the largest collection of and highest quality silver mines on the continent, so they carried out business with their neighbors using “greater silver coins” of higher purity and twenty-five times the value of normal silver. Yet they still only had a quarter of the value of the Twin Kingdom’s gold. Therefore, the majority of the currency circulating within the country was not their own. They needed their treasury to accumulate as many gold coins from the Twin Kingdoms as possible. Having just gotten through a war, however, their treasury was much-diminished.

Buying the coins was actually on the agenda for the worst-case scenario, so even two thousand was a rather attractive prospect. That said, continued discussion wouldn’t serve them here.

“Very well, we shall table the discussion until tonight when the old man arrives. We should not make Princess Isabella wait any longer. I shall escort her. Have the preparations been made?”

“They have. You may bring her whenever it is convenient.”

With a nod of understanding, Aura stood. Isabella was a guest of honor, and from a public standpoint, her visit to Zenjirou was being done out of the kindness of her heart. Making her wait too long would be impolite.

“I will be on my way,” she stated, moving to knock on the door so that she could guide the princess to her husband.



It was Zenjirou's sixth day of suffering from the Blessing of the Forest. He had been moved to a different room with some alacrity the night before and was currently cocooned in the new bed, sweating.

His fever had dropped to around thirty-seven degrees and the swelling of his throat had abated along with the return of his appetite. Until the day before yesterday, he'd barely been able to slurp up plain minced chicken and vegetable soup, but this morning he'd managed to eat something along the lines of mashed potato with a sweet and sour filling added to it. In spite of its similarity to potatoes, it was actually boiled and mashed banana. It seemed closer to home cooking than royal cuisine, but it was relatively easy on the stomach and nutritious, so it was ideal for someone who was ill.

The doctor's diagnosis was that he would recover in the next couple of days. For his part, Zenjirou felt like he was far more comfortable at this point. However, he had been moved out of his normal room to a single bed that was completely unfamiliar, and the new room did not have a single electrical appliance, so he wasn't feeling particularly comfortable.

Regardless, the fight against the illness meant that his body demanded rest. The weather was easier on him than before, but the temperatures were still over thirty degrees, and as he dozed off in the heat, something pulled him back to consciousness... the sensation of a soft hand on his forehead and the sound of an unfamiliar voice.

"His fever has abated to a fair degree. He should be able to return to his normal routine in a day, possibly two."

"Wha?" he mumbled, still half-asleep, opening heavy eyelids to see an elegant middle-aged woman with her hand on his head, "Who're you?"

Her hair was as straight as an arrow, long and chestnut-colored. Kind wrinkles were arrayed around her eyes, which were a dark brown. Her skin was tanned by the sun, although compared to Aura and her countrymen, who shared a skin tone somewhere between olive and brown, this woman had more Western features and coloring. She was clearly not Capuan, and while he wasn't particularly confident in his memory, he was sure he'd remember seeing someone so distinctive.

The foreigner, Princess Isabella, took her hand from his head and stood, lifting her dress into a curtsy. “It is a great pleasure to make your acquaintance, Sir Zenjirou. I am the third child of the eighteenth pope of the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle, Johannes IV. My name is Isabella.”

“M-My thanks for your polite greeting. I...” Zenjirou began, trying to haul himself up in a panic over meeting a state guest of her standing, but Isabella gently held him down with practiced movements.

“Remain as you are; your body has yet to recover,” she said, urging him to relax.

Only with her words did he notice the change within himself. “Eh? Huh? But I feel so much better...”

His long convalescence meant that he still felt somewhat sluggish, but the bone-deep fatigue that had pervaded his body before his last slumber had now disappeared along with the haze of pain filling his mind. He suddenly felt like he could get up without issue.

Isabella’s smile remained as her hand on his shoulder pushed him back towards the bed. “Sir Zenjirou, please stay where you are. The greater ease you are feeling is a result of the health recovery and fatigue reduction I cast upon you. I could have used a rapid recovery spell instead, but this is the Blessing of the Forest, and you will not gain the benefits without recovering from it naturally.”

“H-Hahh... I see.” Although he felt like he had more energy, his skin was still flushed, so he hadn’t fully recovered.

Oh, yeah, Aura mentioned the visit from the Twin Kingdoms when she was here yesterday, and that’s why I was moved.

He’d been informed of the circumstances the day before, but he’d had a fever of over thirty-eight degrees, so he couldn’t be expected to recall the details.

Uh, I’m definitely the social superior, but she’s here for healing purposes, so I can be a bit immodest, right? He kicked his drowsy mind into action in an effort to recall the etiquette he had learned for interacting with other royals.

He cast his eyes around the room and noticed his wife watching over him

from behind Isabella. Meeting his gaze, she gave a slight nod.

Does that mean I don't have to worry too much about my manners? Zenjirou calmed slightly at her signal and leaned back against the headboard, sitting up slightly and redirecting his gaze towards the princess.

"My thanks, Your Highness. I feel much better now."

"Not at all, it was a minor affair. If you rest and recover, I believe you should be able to return to normal tomorrow."

"Right, I underst—ngh."

Sitting up and talking despite his still-present fever was perhaps the reason the end of his sentence was swallowed by a coughing fit.

"Zenjirou, here, water," Aura offered, immediately picking up a metal pot and moving it to his mouth.



“Ah, my bad,” he mumbled. He had gotten used to her care over the last few days, so he felt no shame as Aura served him the drink. He could feel the sweat coating his body, but if anything, it was a pleasant sensation at the moment.

“Phew...”

“Is that enough?”

“Yeah, I feel much better. Thanks.”

Witnessing the natural intimacy between the two of them, Isabella brought a hand to her mouth and chuckled. “I had heard the rumors, but you truly do have a good relationship,” she opined.

“Ah... pardon me,” Zenjirou was a bit embarrassed about being observed by an outsider.

In contrast, Aura smiled, thrusting out her chest as she spoke. “Well, it is far better than the alternative, no?”

Zenjirou was a man from who knew where, while she was considered a woman of valor. Aura was half-convinced there were various disgraceful rumors spreading throughout the neighboring countries and had no intention of allowing an opportunity to promote the strength of their relationship to slip between her fingers.

“You are quite right,” Isabella answered with a trilling laugh.

While the world at large was likely to misunderstand, even in the higher echelons of society, good relationships were by no means rare. A royal’s marriage was often more for the sake of connections between families than for the emotions of the two involved, but that itself meant that both would do their utmost to ensure things went smoothly. They held a great responsibility for their countries and families. If both were prepared to not allow their interests to clash to an excessive degree, and if they could work together, it was far from impossible for love to bloom even some time after marriage. However, it was certainly rare to see a couple that fit together so well after merely half a year.

Are they truly that compatible? Isabella wondered, watching them with a

sharp eye hidden behind her pleasant expression.

“That reminds me. Sir Zenjirou, you came from another world to marry Her Majesty, did you not? I suppose you could put it as ‘a love that transcends worlds’?”

“Eh? Ah, yeah, you could,” he answered, a bit startled by her having noted that he’d come from another world.

The lineal magic of the Capuan royal family was widely known to be space-time magic, and the surrounding countries would have had their eyes peeled as they watched closely for how Aura, the only royal in the kingdom at the time, would handle her marriage. From that perspective, it would have been stranger if his history *wasn’t* known to some extent.

Was it because of that understanding? Or perhaps due to his mind still being sluggish from the fever? Regardless, Zenjirou opened his mouth without much thought.

“It’s because my ancestors were royals from here who went to my world a hundred and fifty years ago, so I came back to marry her. It’s pretty romantic if you look at it like that.”

It was more information than he should have given another country’s representative, and Aura’s face contorted in consternation, but it was too late.

“I see... so, that was something that happened long ago,” Isabella murmured, apparently moved, but her eyes had flashed for a brief moment.

“It is a rumor, all told,” Aura interjected. “It *is* a fact that a direct descendant disappeared from our records around that time, but there is no evidence that they left for another world, or that Zenjirou is their descendant.” She emphasized her words, laying doubt upon his statement even as her tone remained calm.

While Zenjirou may have still been woolly-headed from the illness, Isabella was well-versed in diplomacy and there was no chance she would miss what Aura was trying to say.

“Of course; please excuse me, I was merely caught up in the romanticism and forgot myself. Your treatment aside, I should not have allowed the conversation

to become so protracted given your illness. Your Majesties, I shall take my leave, if I may.” Understanding the implications of Aura’s words, she rose from her chair.

“Very well. My thanks for your exertion on my husband’s behalf, Princess Isabella.”

“Not at all, Your Majesty.”

Aura moved to guide her from the temporary bedroom. While both women were, in their own ways, deeply concerned, the fact that it showed on neither of their faces was without a doubt a result of their being royals by birth.

“Thank you again, Princess Isabella,” Zenjirou said casually from where he lay, the only one ignorant of the loaded undercurrent in the room. “I feel considerably better now.”



That night, Aura summoned Fabio and Espiridion to a private room in the palace for a clandestine discussion. The chamber was a small one, lit by the flickering flames of candles.

Under the glowing illumination, Aura crossed her legs where she sat on a decorated chair and directed the conversation to Fabio, who stood before her.

“I would hear your report,” she instructed.

“At once,” the secretary acknowledged, stepping forward. “We have confirmed the identity of Princess Isabella’s ‘client.’ It was the previous king of Coblago, Louis II.”

A doubtful expression made its way onto the queen’s face at this information. “Their previous king? Strange... calling Princess Isabella to attend their current king would be one thing, but their prior monarch? I have my doubts that they possess the capital to do so.”

The Kingdom of Coblago was a neighboring country, with lands and a population no more than a fifth of Capua’s. Financially speaking, they would most certainly be inferior. It was a small country that happened to be well-placed, and so had survived the war, but calling Isabella for a king who had

already abdicated didn't ring true.

"They would be able to afford Prince Roberto or Tomaso, or possibly His Holiness Matteo if they stretched themselves, correct?" she asked.

Each member of the Gilbelle family that Aura had named was one or two steps below Isabella in healing, and therefore cheaper.

Fabio promptly refuted her, his mask-like expression not budging an inch. "Those you mentioned are all men and would be unable to enter the inner palace."

Aura looked askance at his unrelated reply. "What does the inner palace matter? The patient was their former king, no?"

"Indeed. Therefore, Coblago's inner palace is not the issue; it is our own."

Aura finally understood what Fabio was getting at and straightened quickly in her chair. "What! You mean to tell me we were her goal from the beginning?"

Fabio nodded shortly. "Yes, the investigation is still ongoing, but as you have surmised, Coblago commissioned Prince Roberto. The Twin Kingdoms stated that they would send Princess Isabella instead, with no additional fees."

"Unbelievable! You are saying they were already aware that Zenjirou was suffering the Blessing of the Forest?"

"No, that was a simple coincidence. If they had been aware of it, there would have been no need to dispatch her."

The Gilbelle healers were far above normal doctors. If they were seeing a patient, even a male would be permitted entry to the inner palace in spite of his sex. If they had known that Zenjirou fell under the category of a potential patient, they would not have needed to concern themselves with sending a female.

"I see. So, the Twin Kingdoms dispatched Princess Isabella at a discount simply to meet my husband?"

"Your husband appeared out of nowhere to marry you. The curiosity is far from unnatural considering the circumstances, is it not?"

"Hmm..." Aura remained seated, her legs still crossed as she rested her chin

on her hand.

Fabio was correct, of course; Zenjirou was fully aware of Aura's intentions and refrained from taking center stage out of respect for her. Foreign countries would be unaware of their dynamic, however, and would see it as the kingdom gaining another leader.

If he had been particularly ambitious, there was a real chance Zenjirou could have plunged the continent back into chaos. From that point of view, there was more than enough reason to send someone of Isabella's caliber to investigate.

"We assumed it was over after presenting him to the country. Now we must present him to other kingdoms, I suppose."

"The debut was restricted to our own citizens in order to avoid any potential gaffes," Fabio answered as his liege sighed and stared up at the darkened ceiling.

The last few months had seen a general increase in understanding among the Capuans regarding Zenjirou's intention to stay out of state politics as much as he could. This was at its heart a domestic matter, though, and it would take more time and effort to achieve the same results abroad. Further, the longer this kind of information had to spread across the continent, the easier it was to distort the facts. It might be best to give up on a hope of international understanding from the start.

"Very well, let us move on to other topics," Aura relented. Her gaze fell on the purple-robed elderly man at her right. "Now, old man, are you listening?"

With the conversation suddenly turning to him, the robed man, Head Court Mage Espiridion, replied leisurely, "Hmm, you wish to discuss Sir Zenjirou's possessions... those jewels, yes? Fifty gold from the Twin Kingdoms for a single one is extraordinary."

The topic moved from Princess Isabella's behavior concerning Zenjirou to her extreme valuation of the marbles. As Espiridion agreed with Fabio, the queen nodded in satisfaction.

"I find it hard to believe she would ascribe them so great a value without cause. Do you have any thoughts?"

“Hmm,” the mage murmured, stroking his long beard. After a period of silence, he prefaced his statement with a disclaimer. “Your Majesty, this is a rather flimsy connection, but to what extent are you aware of the Gupta Kingdom’s Thunderwall Staff?”

Aura raised an eyebrow at the question but answered nonetheless. “The one involved in the Miracle of Barang Pass? It was a single magic tool that stalled the enemy’s forces, fifty thousand men, for half a year.”

“Quite right,” Espiridion acknowledged. “The neighboring countries of Kushal and Waltanna fought them. ’Twas in the early days of the great war.”

The country had been invaded from both sides, and standing on the brink of destruction, had protected one of their borders with the Thunderwall Staff while fighting off the forces at the other border simultaneously, successfully protecting the country.

The item was likely the most famous magic tool on the Southern Continent. “Thunder” was the Gupta family’s lineal magic, so the Thunderwall Staff was a magical item made through the collaboration of the Guptas’ powers and the Sharou family’s enchantment abilities. The Gupta Kingdom was located close to a vassal state of the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle, so the creation of the item itself was not unusual.

“The crux of the issue is the time devoted to its construction,” Espiridion continued. “Disregarding the minor details, the staff was without a doubt constructed within the capital of the Twin Kingdoms.”

“Naturally. Unlike the Gilbelles, the Sharous leave the capital as rarely as they can,” Aura agreed.

Espiridion nodded deeply and continued “Which would imply that a member of the Gupta family went to the capital, remained there for a long enough time to create the staff, and returned to their own kingdom, weapon in hand. However, there was not enough time for that.”

“I have heard this too,” Fabio interjected with a tone of realization. “Even considering the swiftest dash drakes, their stay could not have been ten days.”

“I believe it was nine,” Espiridion confirmed, “yet that is assuming ideal

conditions throughout the journey. Realistically, the length of their stay would have been around three days.”

As she listened to her confidants’ conversation, Aura searched her own memories. During the early days of the great war, she hadn’t even been born, so it was unsurprising that she didn’t know all the details. Even so, she understood the oddity here.

Normally, a magic tool was said to take at least a month to create, even for the simplest trifles. An opus like the Thunderwall Staff should have taken *years*. Even the Barrier Carpet she had lent to Zenjirou had taken close to two years during which a Capuan had remained in the Twin Kingdom’s capital, according to their records. If a simple item took around a month, and a national treasure took two years, it was preposterous that the Thunderwall Staff could have taken a mere few days.

Even with the knowledgeable Espiridion as the source, Aura couldn’t take that without question and expressed her doubts. “Might they not have simply sent one of their people in secret to have it created earlier on?”

The old mage took no offense at her suggestion and nodded. “That was what the countries officially announced. The theory is generally accepted across the continent. Even so, there remains a contrary theory, that the Sharou family possesses a ‘trick’ to shorten the time required if it comes to it.”

“I see,” Aura hummed, feeling the heart of the topic approach. These rumors of hidden tricks and magic that the royal families held never died away.

For example, there were those who claimed the Härkänen family’s soul searching magic had a spell that could turn a person into a puppet forevermore, while others claimed the northern desert had been created by the Dernburg family’s evergreen magic running amok. Still others insisted the region had been formed by the Makarov family’s creation magic, and so on.

There were such rumors concerning Aura’s own space-time magic that had drawn sarcastic laughs from her in the past. Allegedly, there existed spells based on her magic that would allow one to revive the dead.

If I had such powers, I would have revived one of my brothers before causing pain for my husband in his world.

It was ridiculous, yet Aura could not laugh it off. She was aware there was often a kernel of truth to such rumors.

Revival is technically possible if the dead are things like bugs or shellfish.

There was indeed a space-time magic spell that could wind back the clock. Of course, there were strict requirements to go along with it, such as the target of the spell having no magic of its own, the caster having witnessed the target at the time they wished to return them to, and being able to directly lay hands on them, so there were few practical uses for it.

Excluding basic life forms like insects and shellfish, the vast majority of living things possessed *some* mana. Therefore, it was effectively impossible to resurrect anyone using space-time magic. It was also impossible to repair broken magic tools. A broken sword or furniture that had no magic within it was doable, but at that point, it would be less effort to simply buy the item anew rather than using the abilities of the royal family to restore it.

Regardless, there was arguably some form of magic that could manage a resurrection, if only of insects. With that in mind, it was possible that other rumors held some similar grains of truth.

Aura ran her tongue over her lips before replying. "What is this trick you speak of, old man?"

"One is that the Sharou family can sacrifice one of their own to drastically reduce the time required to make such a tool. Coincidentally, a member of the family did die of illness around the time the staff was created."

Aura cut through the suggestion at once. "Impossible. The Gupta Kingdom may well be close to the Twin Kingdoms and protect their northern border, but the Sharous would hardly allow one of their own to die for them."

"I quite agree. So I believe that to be a simple coincidence. There is another rumor that has come to light, however. If the items to be enchanted fulfill very particular conditions, the time and labor required decrease dramatically."

This finally felt like the answer to the question, after all the twists and turns. There was a short silence before Aura spoke in a low voice. "So, what form did this Thunderwall Staff take?"

“The item is a secret tool of their royal family, so this is, of course, simply hearsay. But I have heard the staff was constructed from a straight staff of wood... *topped with a large, round crystal of distinct clarity.*”

“I see. An intriguing rumor indeed.”

A wide grin appeared on Aura’s face in the candlelight... much like a feline baring its fangs.

Chapter 3 — The Royal Conception

“Ugh-ahh,” Zenjirou moaned as he stretched out in the sunlight streaming in through the open window. He was wearing a T-shirt and pants after eight days of being stuck in his pajamas. The early morning sun still held a tinge of red, and the cool breeze floating in caressed his body pleasantly.

“Hahh...” he sighed again as he rolled his neck, working out the stiffness. “They say your health is your greatest treasure. It’s kinda cliché, but they’re not wrong.”

He’d spent seven days sick with something called The Blessing of the Forest and had only fully recovered the day before. It had been late when he was examined, so he had simply luxuriated in his first proper bath in a week, done only what he absolutely needed to, and quickly retired to bed, all of which meant that, as far as Zenjirou was concerned, he had only truly recovered that day.

“Actually, let’s check the temperature... oh, only around twenty, it’s dropped quite a bit. That *would* make it feel cool,” he said with slight surprise as he glanced at the thermometer on the wall.

It might still have been near-dawn, but it was much easier on him with the temperature being under twenty-five. He might actually be able to last the day without his ice and fan. When the temperatures were just higher than body temperature, he wouldn’t complain about it, but once they reached the low thirties or so, he’d have to grin and bear it to get used to the climate.

“It’s not like I know how long I’ll have the fan or freezer, either.”

It wasn’t something he wanted to consider, but appliances didn’t last as long as people. He had no spares, so he would someday have to relinquish them. And even while they worked, he could think of other circumstances where he would have to do without... when he had to leave the inner palace as he had done for the banquet, or when an outsider like Princess Isabella came to visit and they needed to hide his things. Getting himself acclimatized naturally

rather than when he had no choice certainly wouldn't be a bad thing.

"Ugh, it's not surprising, but I feel so weak. Maybe I should do some exercises or start lifting? I'm pretty sure I brought the soccer ball and pump I got during uni," he mumbled to himself as he patted his body through his clothes, checking for soreness.

Being bed-bound for seven days, it wasn't particularly strange for his body to go past mere sluggishness and start to weaken. Going back to his prior lifestyle of shutting himself away would carry several risks. He didn't want to get out of breath just from getting up and walking around at his age, so he felt a real need to take his fitness into account.

"The courtyard we put the generator in should work, right? I really need to be more active."

He retrieved the ball from a corner of the room and bounced it on the carpet to check how much air was inside. Until now, he'd subconsciously hoped that he wouldn't get out of shape even as he lazed around, but his illness had emphasized the importance of staying fit. There were circumstances where having or lacking a basic standard of fitness could be the difference between life and death. His miserable time in bed had made him all too aware of it.

"Whoa, guess I shouldn't be juggling the ball in here," he scolded himself, catching it in both hands after losing the rhythm.

The room he used as a living room was "absurdly massive" from the perspective of the average person in Japan, but the control system for the generator was on the wall, and a mass of wires spewed out from it, snaking all over the room to various appliances. Everything was as far away from the center of the room as possible to avoid the risk of tripping, but each extension cord had to get to its corresponding appliance, which meant that some had to cross the room since he didn't have enough to line the wires neatly around the wall. He couldn't bear to think of catching his foot under one of them.

"Guess it'd be best to find an empty room and have it converted to a gym or something. There are loads of rooms here, anyway," he muttered.

A knock came at the door, followed by a voice saying, "Excuse me, Sir Zenjirou, I have brought what you requested."

“Thanks, I’ll be right there,” he answered immediately, rising from the sofa.

It would normally be the maid’s responsibility to open the door for him, but Zenjirou assumed that her hands weren’t free, so he went to open it himself. When he did, his assumptions were confirmed. Standing there was a woman with blonde hair—a rarity in Capua—her hands gripping a wooden bowl as she stood in the doorway.

“The kitchen staff made this following your instructions,” she told him.

The bowl she was carrying was filled with thinly-sliced bananas, fried in oil, seasoned only with a sprinkle of salt. “Banana chips” existed in Japan, but he’d had the kitchen staff make these as a substitute for potato chips. The mashed banana he had eaten during his illness had tasted similar to potatoes, so he’d asked the kitchen staff to cook them in the same way as potato chips.

“Let’s have a taste,” he said as he took one and brought it to his mouth. The still-warm pieces crunched between his teeth. “Mmmm...”

The flavors of salt and vegetable oil spread across his tongue. The base ingredients were a little different than back on Earth, so they weren’t exactly like potato chips, but they were certainly sufficient as a substitute.

“How are they, Sir Zenjirou?” asked the maid.

“Pretty good. They’re maybe a bit thick, though. I’d be pretty happy with them if they were thinner next time.”

“Very well, I shall convey that to the kitchen.”

“Yeah, please do,” he answered as she bowed her head.

He took the bowl from her and shut the door, then sat down on the sofa and put the chips on a low table by his legs.

“Hmm, they’re a bit tough, but they’re good enough to have in place of potato chips. They’re not as strong-tasting as green bananas, either.”

The flavor was more nostalgic than it was tasty. It might seem too soon for him to be feeling nostalgic about Japan after only a few months, but it was an inescapable fact that he had spent much of his convalescence thinking back on his favorite foods. He didn’t consider himself particularly fussy in that regard,

and hadn't actually been dissatisfied with this world's cuisine so far, yet he had been made painfully aware that it was a different matter when he was feeling unwell and relied on his usual comfort foods.

He had no intention of being excessively selfish, but he thought that asking the kitchen staff to recreate certain foods as best they could might not be a bad idea. When he had mentioned it, Aura had left a strong impression on him by saying he could ask as he wished, with an extremely wide smile.

Once he had started working back home, he had rarely eaten snacks, but it was hard to ignore that the pseudo potato chips made him feel like he was back home.

"I'm glad they use sugar here, at least. Maybe I should introduce some new sweets?" he wondered. "Oh, but I don't think you can get dairy products here, aside from eggs. So it'd have to be sweets that don't use milk or butter... Umm, did I bring any recipes like that?"

Capua was close to a tropical rainforest, so the livestock consisted mostly of drakes. By definition, reptiles didn't produce milk. While they also laid eggs, reptile eggs were very different from bird eggs.

Of course, back on Earth, the equatorial regions of Africa and India had similar climates, but they reared cows and pigs as a matter of course, so it wasn't as if farming mammals was impossible. Indeed, there were regions like the royal palace where they had succeeded in domesticating chicken-like birds. The lack of mammal farming here on the Southern Continent was less to do with the climate and more related to the ecosystem and established practices.

"If I got hold of milk somehow, could I make a centrifuge and use it to create butter and cream, maybe? Agh, it's not like I brought an oven, though, so it'd be tough to make sweets myself, even with the right ingredients."

With seven years of living alone under his belt, between uni and work, he knew only the basics. His repertoire consisted almost entirely of curry, stew, meat hash, and rice, along with fried rice and stir fry. Also, he wouldn't exactly be welcome in the kitchen as a male royal. Considering the maids' responsibilities, he should probably assume that cooking on his own wasn't an option.

“That means I’ll have to have them show me the ingredients, then give the recipe to the kitchen staff if I think of something they can recreate,” he murmured, munching on his banana chips as he put on a DVD to kill some time.



That night, after eating and bathing, Zenjirou and Aura spent their time in a single room together, with no one else around.

“So, you wish to move around enough that you remain fit?” Aura asked him.

“Yeah, that’s about the size of it. How about it? Can I turn the courtyard or a room in the inner palace into a gym?”

The two of them were sitting side by side on the sofa, each of their arms around the other’s shoulder as they spoke. The topic of conversation was his earlier idea to exercise and stay healthy. He was the lord of the inner palace, so he *could* just have a room tidied up and use it to juggle the ball, or he could dribble it around the courtyard, but it showed how little he felt like the inner palace was *his* by asking Aura for such things.

“Hmm, I am unaware of this ‘soccer’ exercise you speak of, but if you merely wish to stay in shape, have you considered martial arts? I see no reason you should not learn the ten arts,” she suggested, picking up a banana chip from the bowl.

“The ten arts?” he echoed.

“Indeed,” Aura explained, “it refers to the ten types of skills that warriors should learn: running, spearmanship, bowmanship, mounted combat, climbing, swimming, wilderness survival, the shot put, swordsmanship, and unarmed combat. Of course, very few even among the knights master all of them. The necessities are running, spearmanship, and bowmanship, with knights also focusing on mounted combat. One or two of the remaining arts are usually learned as supplementary skills.”

“Huh...” Zenjirou said, contemplating. Maybe they were similar to what the ancient Japanese knew as the “Eighteen Arms of Wushu?” He didn’t think he could learn them now that he was in his twenties, but there was a certain appeal to the idea. However, after giving it some thought, he had a question. “It

sounds interesting, but who'd be teaching me?"

"I imagine I would select a capable instructor from the army," Aura answered, helping herself to another chip.

Zenjirou's expression shifted to one of resignation before he shook his head firmly. "Yeah, that won't work. It'd be a guy, right? So I'd have to leave the inner palace for that and might end up causing trouble. Besides, even if it's just for martial arts, a student-teacher relationship seems risky."

He thought back to his mentor when he'd been in the soccer club at school. Even though the man had only been their adviser, seeing a teacher in town had made him straighten up reflexively. For someone teaching him martial arts, the effect would be even stronger. It was all too likely that people would try to use that relationship as a method to ingratiate themselves. Octavia's instruction in magic and manners was more than enough on that front.

Aura couldn't hide a pained smile at his reply. "Zenjirou, you are aware you need not be so considerate with all that you do, are you not? I do intend for you to live at least a bit more freely than that."

He scratched his cheek at that before answering. "I mean, not wanting to cause you trouble is part of it, but it's more selfish. Essentially, it's interesting, but not enough to cause myself the trouble to do it."

Aura remained silent for a while, looking into his eyes as he sat next to her. Eventually, however, she seemed to decide there was no falseness to his words and nodded. "Very well. In that case, I shall not insist. Regardless, if you wish to learn martial arts without involving yourself with troublesome people or leaving the inner palace, I can teach you myself when I have the time."

Zenjirou's eyes shot wide open. "Huh? *You* will?"

Aura scooped up a handful of the chips. "I will, although I have only learned the base three along with mounted combat and swordsmanship."

It made sense, now that Zenjirou thought about it. She had lived through a period of strife, so it was hardly unusual that she had learned a few forms of combat. "Whoa, that's amazing," he said, his eyes sparkling, "I'd love that when you're free."

“Very well, leave it in my hands,” she replied with a nod of satisfaction, scooping up another handful of bananas.

For a while, the only sound was the crunching as she ate. At some point, the chips, which had originally been piled high in the bowl, had vanished enough that you could see the bottom. Zenjirou, as it happened, had only eaten a small amount. As Aura reached for the bowl again, he was forced to intervene.

“Say, beloved,” he addressed her.

“Yes, my dear?” She turned to look at him, the chips still in her hand.

He hesitated for a moment, and then forged on ahead. “I’m happy you like the snacks so much, but you should probably stop there for now. They use more fat than it looks like, and I’m worried about you.”

The huge bowl had been quite full, and the chips were too high in calories to eat so many as a snack.

“Oh? Yes, I may have eaten too many now that you mention it.” She finally withdrew her hand.

Zenjirou got up and took out a damp towel from the fridge, which he handed to her. “Here, for the grease,” he explained.

“Ah, my thanks.”

“Is it because you didn’t finish dinner? You shouldn’t stuff yourself with junk like this.”

Her husband was, shockingly, almost scolding her. She finished wiping her hands and shrugged languidly.

“I have no good reply; the fish almost tasted of mud to me.”

The Capuan Kingdom was vast and did have coasts, but the center of the kingdom was far inland, so the fish served in the palace was almost exclusively river-caught. There was a general trend for freshwater fish to have a muddier flavor than those caught at sea, but Zenjirou couldn’t help but look askance at her.

“Huh, really? I didn’t think today’s tasted particularly bad.”

He had only eaten saltwater fish in Japan, so he wasn't too fond of freshwater ones. He would have expected to notice the foul taste Aura had intimated long before her, considering how familiar she was with the local seafood.

Despite that, he was aware that one's senses changed along with the condition of one's body, so he assumed that his sense of taste had been dulled due to the lingering effects of the illness and didn't question it further.

"I am not even overly fond of fried foods with strong tastes and a surplus of oils. Yet I could not stop myself," she confided as she carefully wiped the grease from her hand.

Zenjirou didn't buy it. "You ate almost a whole bowl. Saying you're not fond of them doesn't sound all that convincing." He returned to his seat next to her.

"Well, I am aware of that myself," she argued, pouting unhappily at him, "but it is the truth. If I had to say one way or another, I do not like these strong-tasting, oily foods. I do not hate them, but they are not something I would actively eat... or so I thought."

"Sure, sure, we'll leave the rest for tomorrow," he said, covering the wooden bowl as he did.

"Mgh..." She wasn't happy about it but was aware that she had no real argument, so she let it go and changed the topic. "Ah, that reminds me, I entrusted our wedding rings to Princess Isabella so that they can be made into magic tools. I also had her appraise the marbles and beads, giving her one as thanks. I apologize for doing so whilst you were on your sickbed."

It was a more blatant subject change than she would usually resort to, but Zenjirou didn't make a hobby of teasing his wife and followed the flow of the conversation without complaint.

"Oh, it's fine. I only brought them in case there was an issue with the summoning. I said you could do whatever you wanted with them, didn't I?"

"You did indeed. I shall take you at your word, then. However, the marbles were of a higher value than we anticipated. I believe you must be made aware of this, being their owner."

Aura's expression had regained some of its seriousness as they sat back on

the sofa, and she told him at length about what had happened with the princess.

“Hmmm, fifty gold for a single marble?” he asked. That was the one part of the conversation he just couldn’t wrap his head around. “I know a single gold is worth a hundred silvers or so, right? I don’t know the economy here, though, so the number doesn’t mean much.”

Since Zenjirou wasn’t from this world, and the time he’d spent here had been spent almost entirely shut away within the inner palace, he had no experience in shopping or eating out. He had put the regional tax calculations into his spreadsheet program, so he understood the basic currency, but it had no concrete meaning to him, if he was being honest.

“Fifty gold would just barely be able to buy a home that a lower-class noble wouldn’t be ashamed of. It is a staggering amount for a single jewel.”

“A whole house? That’s astounding,” he said in awe, finally understanding her shock now that he had a better example. *A house is a few dozen million yen, right? Although, land and property might not be worth the same as in modern Japan, I guess.*

Still, he told himself that all he really needed to know was that it was far past his expectations, and he put the specifics aside for the time being. “I expected the value of things to change a bit between worlds, but it’s surprising to hear that its value is so high.”

“So, these ‘marbles’ are not particularly expensive in your world?” the queen asked him, her curiosity clear.

“Yeah, they’re pretty cheap,” he replied easily. “They’re kid’s toys, to be honest: about ten yen for the cheapest, and thirty for the most expensive. Ah, yen is the currency we use. I don’t think you can convert between them easily, because the cost of living is different here, but a newly built house would be about ten million yen.”

Aura ran the calculation quickly in her head. “That would mean you could buy two of these for a single copper.”

If you were to calculate the conversion by comparing a laborer’s wages, the

cost of staple foods like rice and wheat, how much an average meal cost, or various other methods, you would get different factors. You couldn't simply say that one copper was equivalent to twenty yen, but it worked well enough as a rough comparison. If one marble cost about ten yen there, and fifty gold here, a simple calculation led to an increase of about a million times.

"Yeah, that's why I was so surprised. If we could make marbles here, we'd be billionaires, wouldn't we? Or maybe not, since scarcity is a big part of this kind of thing. If we made loads, we'd crash the market and be right back where we started."

Zenjirou chattered on, but Aura had stopped really hearing his words. What he had told her had been such a shock that she'd almost stopped thinking altogether as she reached over and grabbed her husband's arm.

"Aura?"

"Wait a moment, what did you just say? If we were to *make* those marbles?"

"Yeah, that's what I said?" he responded hesitantly, pressing back into the sofa, slightly overwhelmed by the glint in her eyes as she held onto him.

Zenjirou was clearly pulling back, but Aura was in a rare state where she could afford no spare attention for that kind of thing. With a deadly serious expression on her face, she moved closer.

"They are not minerals?" she asked. "They aren't naturally occurring deposits like crystals or agate that are then shaped?"

"Um, no, they're glass. You make them by mixing sand and lime and stuff."

"Sand and lime... do you know how to make them?"

He was well aware of her expectations now and reseated himself properly on the sofa as he shook his head.

"No way. Glassmaking has been around since ancient times, so it can probably be done here too, but you need specific knowledge and skills, so a layman like me can't just make it myself."

"I see. So, it is not that convenient, is it?" She slumped against the cushions, still holding his arm with both of her hands.

An unavoidable sense of guilt assailed Zenjirou at seeing his wife so saddened, and he reflexively tried to comfort her. “I’m sure I recorded a glassmaking contest on one of the DVDs I brought. I don’t think watching it would let us reproduce it, but do you want to have a look?”

Her reaction was dramatic. “I do!” she immediately cried.

“Sure thing, I’ll get it set up,” he offered, his wife’s strong grip finally releasing him as he stood to get the video ready.



A few minutes later, Zenjirou and Aura were shoulder to shoulder on the sofa, facing the TV as it displayed a program he had recorded ages ago. A male idol group had to make a village from scratch, competing in things like farming or crafting. Zenjirou selected the episode where the competition focused on glassmaking and hit “Play.”

He sat there next to Aura, who was watching the screen with a look of extreme focus. He used the remote to pause it multiple times, translating and explaining what the contestants and narrator were saying. After all, the recorded words were not subject to the soul of words, so if he didn’t translate, she would have no idea what was being said.

“Umm, glass melts at over thirteen hundred degrees, so they need to make a special furnace that can withstand the heat out of firebricks.”

“Oh-hoh, I see. Those firebricks sound rather valuable themselves. How hot does it get?”

“Umm, when they were doing metalworking they said that cast iron melts at twelve hundred, so a hundred degrees hotter than melting impure, hard iron.”

“What?! Higher than you need to melt iron? There are no furnaces capable of that on the Southern Continent.”

“So there *are* elsewhere?”

“Yes, the Northern Continent is most advanced in metalworking, and I have heard that they possess the techniques to melt and cast iron. Here, all ironwork is done via forging, and the only metals we can cast are those such as copper

and tin.”

“Huh, so there’s a technological disparity here too.”

Aura was watching the screen attentively, but her face grew harsher with each explanation from him.

“What was that just now?” she demanded.

“Well, normal clay isn’t good enough for firebricks, so they’re powdering broken ones and mixing it with the clay to make them.”

“So, how are firebricks made when broken ones are unattainable?”

“Beats me?”

With Aura’s mood progressively worsening, they continued the DVD. After a time, she again asked for an explanation quite sharply, clearly frustrated by his answers.

“What do you mean by that?”

“Well, it takes a pretty high temperature to fire firebricks, so they made a special kiln for them.”

“And what are those kilns made from?”

“Firebricks from somewhere else.”

“So, when you cannot obtain them from somewhere else, where do you fire firebricks?”

“Beats me?” he said again.

He continued to translate more timidly as his wife grew increasingly annoyed. But he was stumped even in the face of her anger. It was nothing more than an entertainment show, not a manual for how to create glass from scratch. The process wasn’t so simple that you could replicate it just from the basic images being shown. He had told her that before they’d even started, but it seemed his warning hadn’t really landed. She’d probably been overwhelmed by the possibility of creating such materials.

Well, he could understand her displeasure. Hearing that firebricks were made using the powder from other firebricks, and fired in a kiln also made of

firebricks made Zenjirou want to pass some kind of snarky comment himself. It was basically telling you that to make firebricks, you needed firebricks, which was a little absurd.

“So, they must have used a method that did not require firebricks to make the first ones, correct? Do they not use that method in this ‘program’?”

“They don’t.”

“Ugh...”

Her emotions were on her sleeve for once, and Zenjirou patted her back with his free hand. “Calm down, dear.”

“Impossible, honey.”

“Whoa, there.”

“Rawr!”

Seeing as she played along with his cheekiness, she probably wasn’t *completely* mad.

“Well, if it’s not going to be useful, want to just leave it there?” he asked, eyeing the clock.

Aura considered for a moment then shook her head. “No, we started it, so let us complete it. We might still make a breakthrough.”

“I doubt it,” he muttered under his breath. The time on the clock was when he would usually be retiring to the bedroom with her. He had been sleeping alone for the duration of his illness, and had been rather looking forward to their first night back together, but at this rate, he might be stuck waiting until tomorrow.

Well, whatever, it’s not like she’s going anywhere.

“So, continue if you would, honey.”

“Right, dear,” Zenjirou answered with a sarcastic smile in her blind spot.

He put his arm around his beloved’s shoulder and tightened his grip as he continued to translate the program.



Noon the next day found Aura sitting quietly in front of the royal physician, Doctor Michel, her voluptuous chest bared.

“Excuse me, Your Majesty, can you feel anything when I press here?”

“I can; it seems a little tight.”

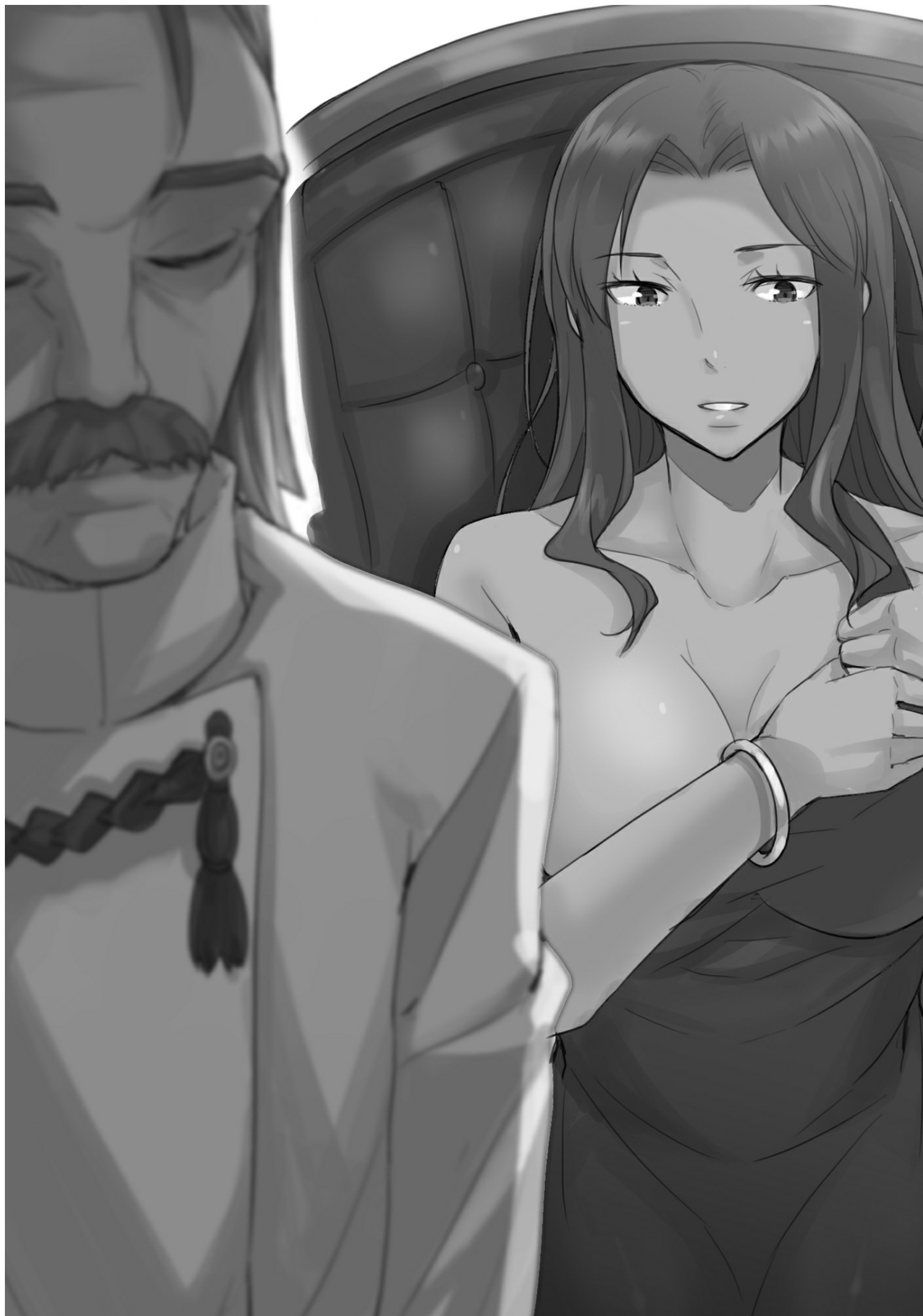
“And here?”

“No, nothing unusual there.”

The aged man was palpating her sensuous body. At a glance, it was rather lascivious, but Aura’s bearing was too imposing to be alluring, and the doctor was focused on his work. Eventually, he nodded, having completed his examination.

“Very well, my queen, you can cover yourself again.”

“So, Doctor Michel, did you discover anything?” she asked, tying the string on her dress’s shoulder.



Michel frowned for a moment, then answered in kind. “Your Majesty, permit me one more question. Have you experienced any issues after first waking, perhaps something like a fever?”

“I have, in fact. I also feel my vision swim when I stand from a chair.”

“Have you noticed any changes to your senses of taste or smell in the past several days?”

“Yes, the fish tasted foul and I found myself wanting to eat stronger food than I would usually prefer.”

“And perhaps you have felt some tightness in your abdomen?”

“Indeed, although I had not noticed it until your examination.”

“And it has been two months since your last monthly cycle.”

“It has, although my cycle is irregular to begin with. During the war, I once went for over half a year with nothing.”

Aura’s eyes as she answered him were filled with a light of expectation. She had called him because she felt unwell, but his questions meant that she was fairly sure of what he would say.

Pregnancy... That was what the aging doctor would assume was the cause of her issues. It was a natural conclusion, come to think of it. Zenjirou and Aura had been lying with one another for months now; there was nothing odd about them conceiving. Aura was the last surviving member of the Capuan royal family, so birthing an heir was both her duty and desire.

“What is your opinion, Doctor?” she asked, leaning forward.

Michel cleared his throat with a cough before answering. “I cannot say for certain, but my examination would suggest there is a strong possibility that you have conceived. However, should this be the case, you are entering the period of pregnancy where it can most easily go awry. Please take care.”

This world had no pregnancy tests, so it was hard to confirm with any certainty until the stomach began to show, especially for women like Aura who already experienced irregular periods. While he made no firm assertions, Aura could feel a fair amount of certainty in his statement and broke into a wide

smile.

“Oh, I see! To think the change in my tastes would be due to pregnancy! I had thought I would wish to eat fruits in that case.”

“That is indeed a common alteration in people’s tastes, but every woman is different. There are those like yourself who prefer oily, strong-tasting food, and those who prefer sweeter foods. Some more extreme examples include women who crave alcohol, and those that are hardest to deal with, the women who wish to not eat anything at all, combined with their morning sickness.”

“Judging from your tone, I should avoid alcohol while pregnant?”

Even without a significant change to her preferences, Aura was quite fond of alcohol, so her mouth twisted as she asked.

Michel’s gentle expression tightened at that as he answered. “Of course. There are other things you should consider. Regardless, the alcohol you drink each day is...”

“Very well, very well. For my child, I shall abstain entirely. Instruct me as you wish,” she said with a reluctant smile, her hands up in surrender.



“Huh? You’re pregnant?! Really?!”

Zenjirou’s first reaction when his wife told him of her pregnancy was shock. He then leaped—quite literally, not metaphorically—from the sofa and rushed over to where she was waiting with a smile by the door. He stopped a short distance away and looked at her stomach. Aura, a pleased smile still on her lips, stroked her belly with her right hand before slowly walking over to the sofa.

“Well, it is not yet certain, but the possibility is high,” she explained. “I have an irregular cycle, so Doctor Michel is unable to say definitively. Of course, with such a high probability, we shall proceed under the assumption that there is indeed a child growing within me. I feel that it may well restrict you greatly, but I ask for your cooperation.”

“Of...of course, I’ll do whatever I can,” he stammered, although like most men, he didn’t yet feel like a father and couldn’t seem to keep still.

Zenjirou would normally be quite relaxed, sitting down next to Aura, seemingly without a care in the world, but now his face was tense as he settled on the opposite sofa. While yesterday he had put his arm around her without thinking about it and put himself on top of her in bed, it suddenly felt like she might break.

Even as she smiled at his obvious unease, she didn't urge him to move next to her as she usually would. After all, this was her first experience with pregnancy as well, and while people's emotions shouldn't necessarily be compared, she was perhaps even more nervous than he was.

"Frankly, I do not know what I should do, either, so I have no instructions to give you just now."

"Ah, yeah, that makes sense. Still, a baby, huh?"

He had been prepared for this. The main reason Aura had sought him out was to continue her bloodline, so it would have been strange if he hadn't expected it to happen. But now that it had, he didn't know how to articulate his feelings. A mix of joy and unease weighed upon him heavily. He was certainly happy, but there was also a tension that made him feel like he wanted to sprint away.

Zenjirou gripped his hands together on his lap, stiff and cold with nerves. He rubbed his palms together to get warmth back into his chilled fingers, continuing the conversation to hide his nervousness.

"So, I guess we shouldn't sleep together for now. Obviously, we shouldn't keep our nighttime activities up, but I toss and turn a bit in my sleep too."

The bed they shared was enormous—it nearly seemed bigger than an inner-city apartment to him—but the two of them slept close together in the center. There had been several occasions where Zenjirou had woken up with an arm or leg splayed out across her. That alone seemed unlikely to cause a miscarriage, but he wanted to avoid even the slightest possibility.

Aura's face, which had so far been fixed in a smile, twitched at his statement. Her smile vanished and her face morphed into a serious expression as she addressed him slowly.

"It's true Doctor Michel did say there was some risk in sharing our quarters

while the pregnancy is uncertain.”

Her tone was questioning as she spoke, but it was slight, and he had so forgotten himself in the wave of emotions that he didn't notice.

“So, we can't sleep together. There's no other option tonight... we'll just sleep in separate rooms. But I guess I'll have a bed moved in around noon tomorrow, and I'll sleep in there,” he suggested, thinking that they could at least share the room even though they couldn't share a bed or have sex.

It was an awfully attractive proposal, but Aura was the queen before she was Zenjirou's wife, and she couldn't immediately agree.

“Are you truly willing to do so?” she asked, her face still quite sober.

“Huh?” he said dumbly, not understanding her meaning.

She examined him closely in the bright LED light, looking to ferret out any sign of falsehood as she questioned him more directly. “If you are to still invite me to your quarters, that would mean you have no plan to call upon any *other* women even whilst I am pregnant, would it not?”

Putting it so bluntly meant that even Zenjirou's dulled mind could understand what she meant. He was implying that he wouldn't lay a hand on another woman while she was pregnant.

Oh, yeah, I guess I am a royal, so I'd normally have a wife other than Aura, wouldn't I?

He'd learned that the men of the Capuan royalty rarely had a single wife. At present, his primary duty was to provide a legitimate heir to the royal bloodline, so they had been left alone as husband and wife, but while Aura was pregnant and they were unable to have sex, there would certainly be women making their moves, or rather influential nobles would be presenting women as potential concubines.

Zenjirou quickly understood his position, and his eyebrows lowered into a frown as he replied almost sharply, “I couldn't look at other women while my wife has my child inside her. Besides, I probably won't be able to think about anything other than you and the baby until it's born.”

He was exaggerating somewhat, but about eighty percent of it was the truth. While he might be worried now, it would be a long time before she gave birth, so it was excessive to say he would be worried until then. But he was sure that if he took a concubine into his bed, Aura's face would end up at the front of his mind even then. It was currently just an assumption, but it was one that he was fairly sure of.

Aura had to stop her face from relaxing at his words, which sounded much like an ardent declaration of love to her. "The issue is that once my pregnancy is confirmed, the influential nobles will undoubtedly take action, and there is more legitimacy to their actions than your refusal."

"Well, yeah, I get that... But, you said you wanted me to be more 'selfish,' right? Would you accept it as selfishness if I said I didn't want that?"

This was the first time her husband had shown any desire to be selfish after being so aware of Aura's position and yet remaining unfailingly passive. She had never expected that his assertiveness would take the form of refusing a concubine. The declaration engendered a warm joy in her that spread right to her bones, but she couldn't hide her bafflement.

"Are you truly so against it to go that far?"

Zenjirou adjusted himself on the dark leather and looked directly at her as he nodded. "I am. If I had to choose whether I would be for or against it, I would be against it, and if I had to choose between for, against, or ambivalent, I'd still be against it. I understood there would be duties as a royal when I married you, so if refusing a concubine might cause harm to you or the country then I'll do my best to accept it... but I don't really know if I could."

"Hmm, I had not thought you were so fidelitous."

Zenjirou smiled wryly at her evaluation and waved his hand. "Nah, it's not like I'm that chaste. I mean, I had a girlfriend for a year in the past, and if you'd summoned me then, I'd have dropped her for you, I think. And if I could go between worlds easily, I might have even two-timed you both, so I'm not necessarily 'fidelitous' like you said; it's just me being selfish. I don't want someone I don't even like being pushed into our relationship and straining it when things are going so well between us."

His denial was somewhat overly self-deprecating.

“It would not strain our relationship. I would, of course, not enjoy the thought of you with another woman, but I am aware enough of my duties to hide such feelings,” she disagreed reluctantly.

“It’d strain it for me,” he pouted. “I’m not shameless enough to have an affair at night and then have the nerve to ask after our child during the day.”

“Hmm...” she murmured, having no better reply.

He was even more against it than she had expected. Frankly, she hadn’t expected him to be against the suggestion at all. Their daily life aside, it was bizarre for a royal in the direct line not to take a concubine while his legal wife was pregnant.

Interesting... I had simply assumed that my husband would share our values despite being from another world, and I did not even realize it, she thought, keenly aware once again that he did not have a typical Capuan background.

You could say that she had been spoiled by him. She had grown used to him understanding her position and accepting her suggestions without any detailed explanations or persuasions, so she couldn’t deny it.

Curses. I told him to be more selfish while actually expecting him to do no such thing...

She closed her eyes in self-recrimination and sighed slightly. While it was in an unexpected fashion, he had finally spoken up for his own benefit, and she would rather grant his desire, to say nothing of the fact that he was refusing a concubine, which was something she welcomed emotionally.

But how realistic was it? Given the current balance of power among the nobles, would they even be able to brush aside the subject of concubines? In the worst case, it would be taken as *Aura* being selfish, not Zenjirou. And that was by no means a small possibility. Considering their positions, *Aura* would be the one refusing them, not him. If people misunderstood that as her ignoring his wishes, it would be a significant, although perhaps not fatal, blow to her reputation.

She finally opened her eyes and spoke calmly to him. “Very well, I shall follow

your wishes as much as can be done; that I will promise you. However, I am the queen, and if there is an agreement between families or an unforgivably high cost to the country if I were to refuse, I may have to ignore those wishes. Please prepare yourself for that... I am sorry.”

The seriousness on her face as she lowered her head made him reply with his usual gentle smile for the first time that day. “I get it. You don’t need to be so somber about it, I’m aware of the position I’m in, mentally, at least. Come on, cheer up. Sadness is bad for the baby.”

She raised her head at that and her expression relaxed. “Very well. We are pressed for time, so let us leave things there for today,” she said, standing.

Zenjirou looked at her in bemusement for a moment before realizing what she meant. They wouldn’t be sharing a bed from tonight on, and there wasn’t time to prepare another in their room yet, so they would be sleeping in separate quarters. The suggestion that it would be all right for only a single night made its way to his throat, but he swallowed the words back down and stood up. His most important duty was to do all he could to help her give birth without incident. Interfering with that was something he refused to allow.

“Right, take care, then, and try to keep your stomach warm.”

“I know. Doctor Michel told me everything. I cannot drink, I cannot take long baths or bathe alone, and I need to pay attention to how I sleep. I cannot begin to fathom how disappointed I shall be if, after all these restrictions, I am not truly pregnant.”

“Ahaha, it’s important. For you *and* the baby.”

As they talked, Zenjirou walked her to the door. The six lights were set up around the sofas in the middle of the room, facing inward, so the area outside them was dark.

“Until tomorrow, then,” she said, turning back to her husband as she opened the door.

“Yeah, good night,” he answered, accepting her embrace and putting his arms gently around her, enveloping her sensuous body in a hug and giving her a chaste kiss.

“Ngh...”

“Mm... ngh... Good night.”

They briefly enjoyed the heat between them before she gave him a somewhat regretful smile and left the room.



Having bid her husband good night, the queen’s destination was not another bedroom but a different chamber within the palace.

“Welcome back, Your Majesty,” said a slender-faced man from within the gloomy room, offering a respectful nod. “How did things progress?”

“It is dark. Light more of the candles,” she answered bluntly before moving to fall heavily into her wicker chair as she usually would. She suddenly stopped, though, and softly lowered herself down instead.

“Certainly; please wait a moment.” He shifted the oil lamp to do as she’d asked.

While he was busy with that, Aura leaned back and looked up at the ceiling. “I have informed my husband of the possibility of my pregnancy, and we have discussed the matter of a concubine. However, he seems to have decided to act somewhat selfishly.”

“Selfishly? That is a rarity for him. How do you mean?”

“Oh, nothing too complicated. Frankly, he’s entirely opposed to the idea of a concubine. Apparently...”

Aura continued casually, relaying the contents of her earlier conversation to the narrow-eyed secretary.

“I see. In short, he would rather share a room with you, unable to indulge in carnal pleasures, than do exactly that with another woman. My, my, you truly are adored, Your Majesty,” he replied after she had recounted her exchange with Zenjirou, with perhaps a hint of teasing in his tone.

“Indeed, and thus far I have led the happiest newlywed life that I possibly could. But that is exactly the issue, as it has led to me treating him as nothing more than ‘an understanding husband.’”

“I certainly never expected that his ‘selfishness’ would take such a form. Even I had begun to accept his understanding nature as a simple fact,” he nodded, his expression vanishing instantly at her comment. “And yet, to think there would be a man so besotted by you that he would see a concubine as a needless hindrance.”

“Fabio,” she returned sharply, “speak plainly.”

The man gave a slight shrug but maintained his rigid posture as the queen glared at him from her seat. “It is nothing; I was merely thinking that there was no accounting for taste.”

“I don’t believe you could possibly have put that more crudely. You are far too insolent.”

“Oh? Then do you see yourself as a woman who is popular with men?”

Despite the growl and anger on her face at his provocative question, she found it difficult to object. Since the kingdom was patriarchal at heart, there was a tendency towards chauvinism, so regardless of her beauty and figure, a strong-willed woman like Aura wasn’t particularly well-regarded in areas of romance by the men of the land.

She was well aware of that, and while she had no concerns about her own appearance or personality, she couldn’t help but consider such things when she saw the typical “popular woman” like Octavia.

Recognizing her disadvantage, she gave a cough and returned to the topic at hand. “Regardless, this is a good opportunity. It would appear that I overestimated him slightly. By his own admission, he was born a commoner. While he possesses the knowledge and understanding to comprehend our situation, along with the open-mindedness and logic to act accordingly, I misjudged the fundamentals of his personality. His values differ greatly from our own.”

“It would appear so. Although among royalty and the nobility, the matter of concubines should be seen as ‘part and parcel’ of the position.”

To begin with, the word “adultery” itself was irrelevant to a royal of direct lineage. Any concubine would be considered a legitimate second wife. And who

could call relations with your *wife* “adultery”?

“We would be asking too much to expect even that of him. He has been as understanding as he is able and considerate of my own position. I never imagined that I would be blessed with such consideration in the first place.”

“Very true,” Fabio agreed, “and yet, such a refusal will not be taken as selfishness on the part of Sir Zenjirou but on your part. The best we may hope for is that it will be taken as jealousy whereupon you are refusing to allow other women near him.”

“I... am aware of that.” She heaved a deep sigh at the painful jab, pressing two fingers to her temple.

The risk of being seen as failing to pay him his due respect was too great to ignore. That, above all else, was something she needed to avoid.

“If you wish to allow this in spite of the risks, Sir Zenjirou must bear the brunt of the disapproval and actively invite such aspersions on himself.”

In other words, Zenjirou would have to be more involved with the public to emphasize how much Aura meant to him, and demonstrate himself that he had no eyes for other women. It would mean that his reputation would suffer in order to protect hers.

“And so, I cannot avoid bringing him trouble.” She scowled, frustrated.

“There is no avoiding it,” Fabio replied coldly. “Rumors of your pregnancy have already spread throughout the palace. The nobles of note are now requesting audiences, and refusing them would bring its own troubles.”

“The news has circulated so quickly?”

She had expected the public to find out, but not that fast. It only went to show how much attention was being paid to the possibility of her pregnancy and the subsequent opening of a new position in the palace. Once the royal lineage was assured, there was no need to hesitate over the selection of concubines.

As she sighed yet again, the secretary changed the subject in an apparent bout of sudden remembrance. “Ah, speaking of audiences, Natalio Maldonado

of the royal knights has requested one with Sir Zenjirou.”

“Natalio?” Aura asked, her voice rising in surprise. “That is not a name I have heard before. For what purpose does he make this request? My husband does not leave the inner palace as a rule, so outside of extenuating circumstances, I cannot approve of an audience with a man.”

“He wishes to convey his thanks for the gift of the wyvern bow and swear his fealty to Sir Zenjirou.”

“Ah, I see; the results of the incident at the banquet.”

The circumstances now refreshed in her mind, she could see that it was inevitable. The tribute of a wyvern bow had been redirected by Zenjirou, and he had asked the donor, General Pujol, to entrust it to someone worthy of its strength. It would seem the general had done exactly that and given it to a knight who showed promise. A knight, when presented with a bow equivalent to a fifth of the value of a dash drake in battle, would naturally wish to convey his gratitude.

“So, will this Natalio be problematic? I do believe my husband decreed that it be entrusted to a knight with a strong sense of loyalty to the *royal family*, did he not?” she asked, her shoulders tensing.

If the knight’s loyalty was to the general rather than the royal household, they could not possibly allow an audience. But the secretary flatly refuted her suggestion.

“I believe even the general is aware of that. While the status of the young man’s house is certainly low, the Maldonado family have long been staunch supporters of the royal line. The knight in question is beyond reproach, so I believe there will be no problems with him meeting Sir Zenjirou. Of course, receiving the bow is a sign of the general’s regard, but I doubt this particular knight would be so easily swayed.”

“Your wording suggests more, though. If there is no issue with Natalio himself, do you have other concerns related to him?”

Fabio nodded. “As you have discerned, that is the case. The knight has a younger sister of an appropriate age. Her name is Kate, and there are no issues

with her personality. She is relatively beautiful, wise, and similarly loyal to the royal family. However, she works within the inner palace.”

Aura shared his concerns upon hearing that. Her face twisted as if she had eaten a lemon as the secretary continued.

“From what I have heard, Sir Zenjirou has an exceedingly friendly relationship with the maids of the inner palace. I would imagine this young woman would be quite willing to convey her brother’s gratitude. I do hope they do not grow too close.”

General Pujol’s aims were as clear as ever. A knight loyal to the crown, with a sister who was equally loyal... With the knight in the fold, and the sister growing closer to Zenjirou, the general would have formed a potentially strong connection, albeit an indirect one, with the royal family.

“Where is this knight stationed?”

“He was originally with the city guard but has since been transferred to the Drake Marksmen Knights under General Pujol’s command.”

His reply was exactly as she had feared. Someone had been granted a wyvern bow and then been transferred to the elite Drake Marksmen. Ostensibly, there was no issue with the process, but in actuality, the general’s ulterior motives were as clear as day to her.

“So, he has forsaken his goal of making his sister my husband’s concubine?”

“No, the general himself has requested an audience as well, so that seems unlikely. I believe he intends to pursue both avenues.”

“As shameless as ever...”

The past few months had seen Pujol behave far more mildly around her, so Aura had hoped his ambitions had calmed to an extent, but it would seem the hungry wolf remained unsated.

“Truly, how vexing,” she murmured with a sigh.

“My sympathies,” Fabio answered, giving a courteous bow.

Chapter 4 — Secret Missive From the Twin Kingdoms

A month later, Aura's pregnancy was confirmed.

Her stomach was not yet visibly protruding, but she had been experiencing characteristic symptoms of pregnancy and her cycle was over three months late, so Doctor Michel had determined that it was certain.

The grand tidings of her pregnancy had, of course, set the country aflutter. Drove of people aiming for an audience with the queen converged upon the palace to offer gifts, along with those suggesting names of potential concubines for Zenjirou. Also coming out of the woodwork were influential nobles offering wet nurses for the queen's child, telling of women who were already breastfeeding along with those whose stomachs were heavy with nearly-due children of their own.

There were many cases where the "wet nurses" would feed the child in the mother's place, but also more figurative instances where the child would simply be raised by another. Either way, any wet nurse and her own children would, without a doubt, have a strong influence on the heir to the throne.

It was usually difficult for news from the outside to reach an isolated place like the inner palace, but this particular information had originated from within, so they could not remain removed from it. Because of this, even Zenjirou had found himself with very little time to relax.

"Ugh, nothing useful. I really screwed this up."

Sunlight streamed in from the open window, the harsh rays having abated rather recently. Zenjirou had been sitting at his computer for a while and had just stretched and cracked his neck before giving a dejected sigh. He had been looking over the materials on his computer ever since Aura had told him she might be pregnant, so he knew perfectly well that he was unlikely to find something new. Even so, he obsessively confirmed it to himself whenever he

had the time, mourning his past self's inadequacies.

“Why did I only ever think about what came *after* the birth?”

He understood that reprimanding himself didn't help, yet the stream of complaints didn't stop. He'd come to this world with the express duty of providing an heir to the throne, and had prepared for it to an extent. Baby bottles, freezers for breast milk, and even boxes of powdered formula were all on hand if needed. He'd even brought several sets of cute baby clothes and books like *Papa's Childcare Manual* and *What a Father Can Do*.

All of the items and information he had brought, however, were useful *after* a safe birth, and none of them would help to aid his pregnant wife in the meantime.

“Man, I thought about childcare, but I just wrote off the birth itself as having nothing to do with me,” he spat reproachfully as he slumped over the computer. More accurately, rather than considering the pregnancy and birth as being irrelevant to him, he hadn't been entirely aware of the inherent risks of the process.

As a young, unmarried, Japanese man, it was hardly surprising. The number of occasions where women were at real risk during their pregnancy in modern Japan had dropped sharply. The death rate was about 0.005%, a mere five women in ten thousand, lower than the likelihood of dying in a traffic accident in Tokyo.

Then again, even on Earth, there were still developing nations without sufficient hygiene standards and equipment where the rate was closer to five percent, with one in twenty women dying. Fortunately, it appeared that Capuan hygiene and medical standards were not terribly low. Even so, it was far from rare for an ordinary woman there to succumb to the rigors of pregnancy and lose her life.

Being the queen, Aura was surrounded by the best physicians in the country, and she was fit and healthy. But while Doctor Michel had assured them there was nothing out of the ordinary, Zenjirou couldn't help but fear the worst.

“If we summoned one of the Gilbelles, that'd solve it all.”

The one exception to the medical capabilities here compared to modern Japan was the healing magic belonging to the Gilbelle royal line. Magic was a supernatural power, and healing magic could recover wounds, rejuvenate a patient, and even remove mental fatigue. If one of the members of the Gilbelle papacy were nearby, he would have nothing to fear. Aura would be even safer than if they were in Japan.

Even the Kingdom of Capua, though, reigning over the west of the Southern Continent, would find it near-impossible to hire a member of that family for the duration of a pregnancy. The birth was over half a year away, and the Gilbelles would never accept such a long contract given how concerned they were about keeping their blood pure and their royals safe.

That being the case, Zenjirou would have to settle for calling on them only if her condition took a sudden turn for the worse. It might have been a fantasy, considering the fastest method of transport in this world was a dash drake, but there was one method—in this very country, in fact—that could make the possibility a reality.

“If there was someone other than Aura who could use teleportation magic, most of our problems would be solved,” he mused, having lost track of how long he’d been sitting there.

Space-time magic users like the royal family of Capua could ignore the barriers that distance posed. If they used teleportation magic, they could go anywhere on the continent in an instant. However, the current users numbered only one: Aura. And since calling for a healer would be required when she herself was the patient, she could hardly use her own magic to do it.

“This is something I should be doing. I need to be able to use space-time magic.”

Zenjirou had the ability, although it was latent, to use space-time magic. However, it had only been a few months since he had started his studies, and it would usually take close to three years to become capable of casting anything. His teacher, Octavia, had told him the timescale could vary significantly based on individual circumstances and how much the person practiced, but that didn’t mean he could shorten the three-year average to a single year, let alone a few

months. If he were to succeed, it would take something along the lines of two years and ten months, or maybe two years at the absolute best. It was utterly impossible for him to manage it while Aura was pregnant.

“But that’s no reason to slack off. It’s not like this’ll necessarily be her only child,” he told himself, shutting down the computer and slapping himself lightly on the cheek. “I want to study more, but spending extra time with Octavia while Aura’s pregnant would definitely look weird. Maybe I should ask for an older woman to work with me, someone who wouldn’t cause rumors to spread. At worst, maybe I can leave the inner palace and get a guy to teach me.”

Zenjirou had enjoyed his life thus far, shut away under the pretense that it was to protect his wife’s position, but he was willing to take on some difficulties and leave the palace to keep her and their child safe. In fact, among the endless concerns he had about the pregnancy, he would need to leave the inner palace regardless to give an audience to the knight who had been loaned the wyvern bow, even if the meeting would be a short one. Perhaps he could use the opportunity to figure out what kind of issues leaving the inner palace would actually cause.

“Maybe I can act as her representative for public appearances that don’t need difficult decisions,” he said suddenly, pacing in circles as he thought things over.

Acting as her representative could influence her position within Capua’s patriarchal society. That was a fact, but putting such concerns before her and the child’s safety was prioritizing the wrong things. Essentially, Zenjirou would need to be careful and act like a well-mannered puppet.

“I’ll have to think about it properly,” he told himself, mentally affirming several decisions as he waited for his lesson with Octavia.



“This is rather troublesome,” Aura murmured, a rare near-complaint for her as she took a break from work due to a sudden bout of nausea.

It was a symptom of early pregnancy called morning sickness. If Doctor Michel was correct, the worst of it would pass soon, but she couldn’t help longing for the day it was over.

“And I was certain I had learned to... suppress nausea on the battlefield...”

“It would seem that a brief moment of psychological nausea is not the same as a pervading sense of it from pregnancy.”

“Indeed not, and I have become painfully aware of the fact... not that it is of any aid,” she returned, glaring up at Fabio from where she was leaning over her bucket. She couldn’t help but snap back each and every time he used his usual unadorned tone. She could now understand why Zenjirou hadn’t wanted people around while he was ill. Her condition made her more aggressive, and not letting that show was a significant burden.

In that way, she was thankful for Fabio’s presence. He had both the loyalty and forbearance to take a little harshness from her, and he was usually one to speak his mind bluntly, so if she needed to complain, she could speak freely. She would have to reward him and apologize in some form once she had given birth, but she could prevail upon his loyalty for a while yet.

Aura sipped some water from a silver cup and swished it around her mouth before spitting it into the bucket, letting out a small sigh as she sank back into her chair.

“So, what is next on our agenda?” she asked.

At the indication that she was ready to continue, rather than asking if she was certain or if she was feeling well enough, Fabio promptly resumed their discussion.

“Very well, our next topic is the letter delivered by an envoy from the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle.”

“Ah, yes.”

She closed her eyes tightly and shook her head twice, then a third time, to clear her mind. An envoy from the Twin Kingdoms would normally be permitted a direct audience with her, but given her pregnancy, they were reducing the opportunity for external factors to come into contact with her as much as possible.

“I assume it concerns the rings I entrusted to Princess Isabella. Could I examine the missive?”

“Yes, here.” He smoothly pulled out the letter and placed it into her proffered hand.

“The Sharou crest?”

The wax seal was set not with the family crest of Isabella but with the Sharou royal family’s, and the realization caused Aura’s face to crease into a slightly puzzled expression. A short period of consideration led her to conclude that, although it had been Isabella Gilbelle she had asked, the actual enchanting would be done by someone from the Sharou family, so receiving a letter from them wasn’t strange.

Her uncertainty quelled, she pulled a short bronze blade from the desk drawer and used it to cut through the seal.

“Hmm...” she murmured, the start of the message being exactly what she had expected.

As she read, however, her eyes narrowed in shock.



“Your Majesty?” Fabio asked, surprise plain in his voice for once as he moved to support Aura, whose chair had clattered back as she quickly stood.

“I am fine; it is nothing important,” she replied, but her pale face belied her words, the blood rapidly draining from her cheeks.

“Very well.” In spite of the blatant falsity of her statement, he decided to wait and withdrew.

When Aura finally finished reading the letter, she took three deep breaths. Her face was still pale, but the expression on it was far calmer now. Sensing an appropriate moment, Fabio spoke carefully.

“Your Majesty, may I ask about the contents?”

Rather than being sent by way of dwarf wyvern, this missive had been passed directly from one royal family to another. A secretary like Fabio had no real right to read it. But after taking another deep breath, Aura answered slowly, as if she were holding back a passionate outburst.

“The majority of it is what we assumed. As thanks for transporting Princess Isabella with my teleportation magic, they have accepted the commission to create magic tools from the rings per my request.”

Her secretary listened, wordlessly urging her to continue. Whatever had left her so shaken made even the usually stone-faced man clench his fist and feel his palms go sweaty.

“The issue lies within the pleasantries, and the ‘rumor’ included with them. Said rumor concerns a princess born to the Sharou family.”

“A princess within the Sharou family? There are many from the branch families, but I believe Princess Karolina is the eldest of the direct line at fifteen years of age.”

“Ah, it is not a current matter; it mentions a princess who vanished from their records approximately one hundred and fifty years ago.”

“One hundred and fifty...” Fabio echoed, his mask cracking slightly.

A royal who had vanished one hundred and fifty years prior, and a woman at that. Now understanding just *who* this must concern, and having a generally

correct view of the situation, he moistened his dry lips and waited to hear what the queen would say.

“It would seem that, due to their complete removal from official records, this is a rumor only, but allegedly, a princess of the Sharou royal family fell in love with a man she would not have been able to marry at the time. It is said by some that the man was a simple commoner but other accounts claim he was from the royal family of an—at the time—opposing kingdom. Thus the two fell in love whilst unable to wed and eloped. They ultimately left for a new land where no one from their own kingdoms would be able to reach them.”

The last sentence was practically spat out as the words gushed from Aura’s mouth. Fabio followed his queen’s earlier example and took several deep breaths of his own. These were indeed grim tidings that would inevitably shake their current arrangement.

Regardless, the secretary was not directly involved and therefore far calmer than she. His voice was steady as he replied. “So, it would seem the prince spoken of in Capua, who fled to another world, was accompanied by a princess from the Sharou family. In other words, while the blood of the Capuans runs in Sir Zenjirou’s veins, so too does the blood of the Sharous?”

Aura shook her head, ashen-faced. “It is impossible to tell. No one knows the truth. The writer of this letter believes so, however.” Her nostrils flared in displeasure as she threw the letter onto the desk. The topic was extremely unpleasant, but she knew full well how important it was.

In this world, the unique skills that royal families possessed encouraged the maintenance of their individual bloodlines. Thus, there were no inter-royal marriages like there had been in the middle ages in Europe.

To use Capua as an example, users of space-time magic within two degrees of separation from the main line were not allowed to marry anyone from another country. Royals with space-time magic were an asset to their kingdom and could even be used as part of the country’s firepower, depending on the circumstances. Unease over the possibility of the bloodline being mixed with that of another country was understandable.

“Still, are the contents true? What of the possibility that they are taking

advantage of the rumor to cause unrest within our lands?”

Aura shook her head unhappily at the suggestion. “I cannot deny there is a chance of that, but the messenger was too slow for it to seem intentional. It has been a month since Princess Isabella was here, so having an envoy bring the letter to us directly rather than sending it by dwarf wyvern makes that unlikely. If unrest was their goal, they could have used the wyverns far more easily.”

Since using dwarf wyverns involved sending multiple copies of the information in hopes of at least one of them arriving safely, it was far easier for details to be leaked. If the Sharou family had wanted to cause an uproar by spreading rumors, there was no reason for them not to do so upfront.

“I see. Then what of the option of feigning ignorance?”

Aura’s gaze swung awkwardly off to the side at his daring suggestion. “Impossible. During her examination, my husband confessed it in front of Princess Isabella. He himself said that he was the descendant of a Capuan royal who fled to another world to elope.”

“That... was rather rash,” Fabio eventually managed, for once almost lost for words.

“It could hardly be avoided. Who would have assumed this information would be so important? Moreover, he was ill at the time.”

“I understand the circumstances,” Fabio replied, cutting harshly through her defense of Zenjirou, “but it does not alter the fact that it was rash.”

After a few more moments of thought, he put the grave situation into words. “So, that means the rumor is credible. Your Majesty, you are certain Sir Zenjirou carries the blood of the Capuan royal family?”

Aura leaned back in her chair, nodding. “There is no mistake. That was a condition of the summoning. My husband’s magic is not particularly strong for royalty, and he would not be able to use both space-time magic and enchantment magic simultaneously.”

There were no examples of a royal possessing two bloodlines, so they couldn’t declare it with certainty, but prevailing theories held that it was possible to manipulate two bloodline magics at the same time. Those theories

also stated that for it to be possible, the holder would need twice the mana normally required.

“Which would mean that the Sharous’ fear is the latent potential in his blood and any children born with it.”

As Fabio spoke, his gaze came to rest on Aura’s stomach. The queen unconsciously rested a hand on her belly as she answered. “Precisely, although I doubt my own child would be an issue. Even if Zenjirou did inherit both bloodlines, and to an equal extent, when mixed with my own strong ties to the Capuan bloodline, the Sharou bloodline will be suppressed without question.”

That was assuming the child was not a monster born with such reserves that he or she would be able to use both forms of magic without issue. The Twin Kingdoms would not be basing their concerns on such extraordinary theories.

“Yes, that would appear to be the case, but a child between Sir Zenjirou and a concubine would be another matter,” Fabio commented. “In that case, there would certainly be a possibility that the child would inherit enchantment rather than space-time magic.”

“I believe that to be what the Sharou family is concerned about.”

She could understand the fear of their country’s closely-guarded abilities falling into the hands of another government, particularly in the case of the Sharou family, whose skills were inextricably linked to both the defense and treasury of their kingdom. Without a monopoly on enchanting, there would be a huge drop in their finances. Handling things indelicately here could lead to the Twin Kingdoms moving towards another great war.

“For now, my husband will not take a concubine, and intimating such should soothe the Twin Kingdoms.”

“And will that cause them to bury the hatchet?” her secretary asked dubiously.

Aura let out a sigh. “Unlikely. Even if he takes no concubine publicly, they will likely worry that he will impregnate an unconnected woman and have the child brought up as another’s to create an enchanter of his own.”

In fact, Aura herself might have been tempted to do just that if it were

possible. She was well aware of the risk of angering another country, but the prospect of a Capuan enchanter was terribly alluring.

“At any rate, we should consider ourselves fortunate that we have avoided the worst timing for it.”

“Quite true,” Fabio agreed. “If this had occurred before your pregnancy, or after Sir Zenjirou had taken a concubine... I shudder to think.”

If the information had come to light before Aura was carrying his child, the Twin Kingdoms may have demanded that Zenjirou be handed over to them. And if he had already taken a concubine, it could have been the spark that ignited a full-scale war. This was likely the best possible timing for such a realization.

“If they had not sent this missive, I would not have had the faintest clue about my husband’s heritage. If they fear the snake, they should not prod the bush,” Aura sighed in disappointment and discouragement.

During her speech, however, Fabio had regained his cool. “I would assume they are unaware that we did not know the truth. Or, more accurately, there was no proof that we were ignorant of the rumors. Perhaps they decided that a wait-and-see approach would leave them unable to act if we were to *become* aware of it later on?”

“That would be about the size of it. Regardless, I must confer with my husband first. Considering the state I am in along with the matter at hand, I doubt it is possible to resolve the issue while keeping it a secret from him.”

Fabio looked like he wanted to contradict her but declined to put it into words, saying instead, “Very well. Regardless of its importance, this is a problem rooted in marriage, so I shall leave it to you.”

“Please do,” Aura answered with a firm nod, having forgotten her sickness during the intense discussion.



That evening found the queen sitting across from Zenjirou in their quarters.

“...therefore, it is unlikely the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle, or more accurately, the Sharou royal family, will leave you in peace if you have inherited

enchantment magic. While I regret having to rescind my previous remarks, you *cannot* take a concubine. I apologize, but things will be rather tumultuous for a while.”

Aura had eaten and bathed, and the two were now settled comfortably in the inner palace. She had explained the details of the missive, all the information therein and what could be assumed from that information, along with the possible courses of action available to them. She had told him of the likelihood that the woman the Capuan prince had eloped with was a Sharou princess, and that, as their descendant, he may have inherited the blood and abilities of both families.

She had spoken too of the potential that his offspring might exhibit not only the space-time magic but enchantment magic, and the fact that he must therefore have no concubine in order to avoid needlessly provoking the other kingdom.

But because Aura’s got a stronger connection to the Capuan bloodline, the traits from the Sharou family will be suppressed, so that’s not a problem, I guess...

It hadn’t quite sunk in for Zenjirou, so he went over what he had heard in his head as he reclined on the sofa. He reached out to grab his glass, which contained a mixture of water, sugar, and fruit juice, and took a sip. As he tilted it to his mouth, the ice inside sloshed and splashed the drink onto his face.

“Ack?!”

Whatever else was going on, he wouldn’t normally make such a childish mistake. The revelations about his origins had evidently shaken him more than he’d expected.

“Are you all right, Zenjirou? Getting that in your eye would be exceedingly painful.”

“Yeah, I’m fine, just got a bit on my face,” he answered in embarrassment, pulling a gauze handkerchief from his pocket and wiping himself off. There was something he wanted to know regardless of what the answer might be. “Does that mean that, honestly, I’m a risk to the country?”

A wide smile made its way onto Aura's face at her husband's frank question. "No, your lineage is a slight problem, but considering our current position, your absence would be a far worse prospect than your presence. You need not worry."

His wife's assurances made him feel like he'd been fretting over nothing, so he smiled shyly. "Ah, yeah, all good. I wasn't planning to run away or anything; I'm not that self-sacrificing. I was just thinking the nobles might end up taking action if I posed a threat to the country's stability." His answer made his fear spike as he shuddered.

"Hmm..." Aura murmured at the unexpected answer, falling silent for a time. His thoughts were calmer and harsher than she had expected, so she considered carefully before answering. "I think it is unlikely to be a concern. Currently, the only people who know of your connection to the Sharou family are them and us, and the information is top secret. Even if it were to become public knowledge, I believe the nobles of our country would be unlikely to want to cause you harm. The heir growing inside me does not change the fact that you are one of the few with strong ties to the royal family. The disadvantages of your loss would far outweigh the disadvantages of your presence."

So, if he was aiming to be careful, his concerns should not be aimed at the local nobles but the Twin Kingdoms, she added mentally. His situation was undoubtedly a nuisance, though. If he were out of the way, the Sharou family would be the ones who benefited. Therefore, it was necessary to initiate some form of hidden negotiation so that they would not see him as being enough of a threat to wage war over.

Of course, there were people in both countries who might act hastily and move to deal with Zenjirou regardless of the logic of it, but trying to account for every variable would quickly overwhelm them, so such outliers would need to be dealt with reactively.

Turning these thoughts over in her mind, she frowned slightly and continued. "However, as I said, your ancestry is currently a secret, so it cannot be used to refuse concubines. Do you know what that means?"

Zenjirou looked up at the ceiling when she questioned him, thinking briefly

before answering hesitantly, “Umm, so... I’ll need some other excuse rather than the truth when I say no?”

His answer was correct, and she gave a shallow nod. “You will. However, as we discussed, refusing concubines is politically unnatural. Frankly, it is difficult to conceive of a reason the nobility will accept. I must apologize for asking, but might you use your selfishness as a reason for refusing?”

“My selfishness? What do you mean?” he asked in confusion.

Aura’s embarrassment won out over her logic, and her gaze was unsteady as she answered. “I thought we could make your opinions from our own discussion of concubines public. So, well... you could say that you wanted to avoid anything impinging on our time together, or that you were completely enamored with the baby and me, with no room to think about anything else... or a similar excuse.”

“Ooh! That’s what you mean... right, right.”

Zenjirou couldn’t hide his lack of composure, and he felt his face flush as he sputtered his response. He had said some rather embarrassing things when they had talked it over, now that he thought about it. Nothing he’d said had been a lie, but the truth of the words didn’t change how mortifying they were.

They already had a child on the way, but a painfully awkward silence fell between the two of them. Eventually, Aura seemed unable to take it any longer and raised her voice as she went on.

“You see now. Not only can we not publicize your lineage, but there is also no other excuse they will accept. Therefore, you shall have to use your emotional argument as a shield and force it through. That will be the most reasonable option. I apologize, but this will end with your reputation being sullied. I rather imagine you will be saddled with the image of a man who lost himself over a single woman, and who foolishly ignores politics in her favor.”

Zenjirou rose from the sofa as he watched his wife bow her head, her hands clasped by her knees, and he quickly moved over and sat down next to her.

“Zenjirou?” she asked as he took her hand and gazed into her eyes.

“This is the best option, though, right? Then it’s fine; a little ill-repute won’t

really hurt, and it'll stop me from being put on a pedestal, so it's actually kinda helpful. Besides... those rumors... would all be true."

"Zenjirou..." she breathed, a soft smile making its way onto her lips. She reached out with her free hand to touch his face. "Your face is scarlet."

"Stop that!" he cried, his feelings unusually clear as he comforted his wife in spite of the awkwardness he felt. "I was holding in the embarrassment!"

The queen's smile had returned completely at the sight of his red face, and she stroked his cheek, apologizing with a hint of laughter in her voice. "Sorry, sorry. I simply could not help it, your devotion made me too happy to resist. Thank you; I shall ensure you are repaid for this."

Zenjirou answered in a lower tone as he felt the cool fingers of his wife tracing lines along his ruddy cheek. "It's fine. I'm always taking advantage of you, so putting in a little effort to keep up my lifestyle is nothing."

This time, it was Aura's turn to feel embarrassed, and she answered plainly, "I suppose so. Being the queen means that I must not invite issues that might damage my reputation. A reputation for my severity on the battlefield or my cool head during negotiations is useful, but matters of the heart are not."

The prince consort refusing a concubine because he was consumed by feelings for the queen would result in him being seen as a political fool, but the queen blocking him from such actions herself would lead to dissent and questions about whether she should remain upon the throne. If one of them had to accept the label of "lovestruck" then Zenjirou was the natural choice.

After a while of him holding her hand and her stroking his cheek, Zenjirou gently released her and continued the conversation with a sober expression.

"Besides, I asked for this. I have to apologize for taking back what I said before too, but I think I'd like to do more outside of the inner palace, if that's all right."

Aura's face tightened instantly. It was a natural request, but it was so far from his words and deeds thus far that she found her voice sharpening. "You want to? Why?"

He felt the sharpness of her tone but didn't falter, answering while keeping his own voice soft. "Yeah, this month's worn on you pretty heavily, hasn't it? So,

I thought I could act as your representative for things that don't need any serious decisions and that are appropriate for me to handle. I know that runs the risk of attracting the attention of the nobles, but I think your health is more important."

"Hm..."

She fell silent at his sincere concern. Certainly, the month since her pregnancy had come to light had seen many obstacles to her productivity. Even restricting herself to the minimum amount of work for a monarch, she had kept the country running, ensuring that people and laws were in place. A proxy would undeniably make things easier.

"Well, I appreciate the offer, but you are aware that it would make things much busier for you?"

"I'm ready for that," he answered with a laugh. "Well, I say that, but it'll probably be worse than I'm thinking."

"Far worse, without a doubt. Once you start involving yourself in matters outside of the inner palace, it will not only be the ambitious who cause issues. Even my confidants will be looking at you with skepticism."

As tempting a target as the prince consort's proactive change would be for some, it would be equally concerning for those who had sworn their loyalty to Aura herself. Without a doubt, her right hand, Fabio, would look questioningly at every action he took.

Her husband frowned at that before answering. "Obviously, if it'll cause you trouble, I'll restrain myself."

"Hmm..."

She pondered the matter a while longer. It was true, she had initially sought a husband who would not interfere in politics at all, but a husband working to maintain her own power was far more desirable than one who did nothing. However, while he had so far shown no sign of hindering her political influence, she had her doubts about whether he could negotiate a conversation with the wily nobles without making any unwise promises.

But it is also true that my current state will have a large influence on the

country's future politics. I had not thought pregnancy would be such a detriment to my work.

Her initial plan had been to continue having children every year for some time, but her current experience suggested that the goal was unrealistic. The gestation period was commonly ten lunar months and ten days. A year had twelve of those months, or thirteen during the years with an intercalary month. If she had a child each year, she would spend five-sixths of her time pregnant. It would inevitably impact her ability to govern.

Being both mother and ruler is truly a heavy burden.

It was at the very least unrealistic to continue with no marshal or prime minister in place. Yet if she were to install anyone into those positions, she would see her power and authority decrease in proportion to her burdens. The power balance between her and the nobles would become an even greater issue.

So, there might be some worth in allies whose motives I can trust, even if I cannot rely on their abilities, she mused, looking at Zenjirou. He simply looked back and remained silent as he waited for her answer.

There was a long, quiet moment as they looked into each other's eyes. Eventually, Aura's expression relaxed. "Very well, the burdens upon me are certainly too heavy at present. I would appreciate it if you could aid me. However..."

"Yeah, I get it; if I start causing trouble instead and 'you decide' it, then 'of my own volition,' I'll shut myself away again," he interrupted with a smile.

Even as a monarch, interfering with her husband's free will would ruin her reputation. Zenjirou had been made well aware of the country's values on that front. He was indeed the best husband she could have asked for.

Her expression broke at his deep love for a moment, but she quickly pulled herself together and replied, "I apologize, but please do. That does remind me, though... the current plan is for you to leave the inner palace to receive knight Natalio Maldonado's oath. I shall have Fabio, my trusted advisor, accompany you."

Fabio would doubtlessly give him precise instructions. And while she didn't want to consider it, if Zenjirou began to grow ambitious, her secretary would soon recognize it and deal with it accordingly.

"Then I shall retire to bed. It is a little early, but I must leave more time to make up for the sleep I lose," she said as she rose slowly.

It wasn't every night, but her sleep had recently been interrupted by discomfort, and even if that hadn't been the case, Doctor Michel had said she should sleep as much as she could. Her late-night activities had become a habit since their wedding due to the lighting devices that Zenjirou had brought from his own world, but her prior habits would have seen her going to sleep around this time on a regular basis.

"Huh? It's already that late?" he asked, glancing at the clock as he stood to follow her. He took her hand gently. "Yeah, let's go to bed."

"You do not have to retire early as well," she protested as he guided her to bed.

"It's fine; the maids are in the living room, so I wouldn't be able to relax anyway."

The maids were on watch in case Aura fell ill during the night, and they would wait in the living room as it was the only room connected to the bedchamber. Zenjirou usually had them stay out during his private time in the living room, but he wasn't willing to be selfish when it came to his wife's safety and comfort. At this point, he felt less uneasy when the maids were in the neighboring room, but he still couldn't comfortably lounge around in there while they were present.

"I see; then let us head to bed," Aura said, intertwining their arms.

"Yeah, let's."

There were currently two beds in the room, so they opened the door slowly, still arm-in-arm and reluctant to part.

Chapter 5 — A Step Outside

It was early afternoon, several days later.

“Knight Natalio. I hereby induct you as my personal knight. I have great hopes for your valor and loyalty.”

Zenjirou was standing in front of, and addressing, a young knight in a room within the royal palace, doing his best to maintain a certain gravitas with his words.

Natalio Maldonado was the name of the man kneeling before him. He looked to be in his mid-twenties, about the same age as Zenjirou, with dark brown hair and gray eyes—the prototypical coloring of a Capuan. He was genuflecting with a humble look on his face.

His tight expression might have seemed overly serious, but there weren’t many warriors who would feel relaxed at a ceremony whose sole purpose was to demonstrate their loyalty to a member of the royal family. Making any judgments on his personality from this first impression would be dangerous.

Zenjirou drew the sword he had received from Natalio smoothly from its leather scabbard. The well-maintained weapon’s blade shone in the light from the window. *It’s about fifty, sixty centimeters long?* he thought to himself. The length of the grip made it look like a one-handed sword, but its weight made him feel that it wouldn’t be easily wielded with a single hand.

Zenjirou took the flat of the blade and rested it on both of Natalio’s shoulders in turn before slowly returning it to its scabbard.



Then, he held the sheathed sword out whereupon Natalio accepted it in both hands, still kneeling, before answering, “My Lord, I shall never transgress or fail your orders or your principles. I shall fear no difficulty as I become an instrument of your will, Sir Zenjirou, hereby pledging my life to this.”

Thankfully, the ceremony of Natalio’s fealty concluded without incident.

Once the knight had departed, Zenjirou let out a tiny sigh of relief, inaudible to anyone else in the room. He’d somehow managed to pull through without committing any faux pas.

“Good work, Sir Zenjirou.” The voice of the slender-faced secretary, Fabio, made him reflexively tense up and jump slightly.

Theoretically, the man was here on loan from Aura, but unless Zenjirou’s estimation was mistaken, the look on his face showed no sign of that being the case. What Zenjirou could see was the look of a horse handler making sure the prize stud didn’t do anything stupid while it was gallivanting around.

I mean, he wouldn’t say that if he accepted me as a superior... wait, no. Gotta be careful, that’s not it. The soul of language might mean that I can understand the words well enough, but I sometimes forget that this isn’t actually Earth.

Since the first time they had laid eyes on each other, the older man had never shown any hint of a favorable impression of Zenjirou, so the prince consort had a less flattering impression of the secretary than was warranted. Words of appreciation were normally offered from a superior to a subordinate, and the other way around was considered rude. That, however, was a Japanese societal norm. Interpreting the older man’s comment as a sign of hostility was taking his distrust too far.

He considered the correct answer as a royal based on what he had learned from Octavia. “No, it wasn’t much. That was fine, then?” he asked.

The man agreed with his usual opaque expression. “It was. Henceforth, in addition to acting as a member of the Drake Marksmen, Sir Natalio will simultaneously carry out his role as your vassal. A royal vassal earns twenty large silvers each year, so it should be of great aid to the Maldonado family. While his wages will technically come from Her Majesty’s funds, you shall be

the one paying them, so please bear that in mind.”

Zenjirou was somewhat surprised. “Oh, he gets extra pay?”

Fabio’s expression didn’t falter as he answered in the affirmative. “He does. A knight’s loyalty is bought with money.”

The words lacked the romanticism one might have expected from a fantasy-like world.

“It is?”

“Of course, the money is not the be-all-end-all. A liege’s words strengthen his vassal’s fealty, and his actions maintain it. However, fundamentally, at the root of it is money. Without that foundation, a knight’s fealty will not hold.”

The secretary’s blunt words were completely pragmatic and commensurately easy to understand. Yes, it lacked romanticism, but unlanded knights had only their wages from the kingdom to live off. Their valor and fealty were quite literally for sale, and they had to get the best price they could.

“I see,” he nodded in understanding.

“Ah, speaking of such matters, have you any plans to take territories or titles of your own?” Fabio asked, as if the topic had jogged his memory.

Zenjirou started again at the sudden shift in subject but did his best to keep the discomfort from his face and voice. “Territories or titles? What do you mean?”

“Indeed, there are multiple areas under the direct control of the royal family even outside of the capital. They are currently under Her Majesty’s management, and there are magistrates installed there, but as royalty, you have a right to them as well. Of course, such a role would only last for your generation.”

A monarch and the royal family, in addition to their claim to the throne, often had their own lands and titles. In fact, it was rarer for someone of royal status to not have a single piece of land to their name. There were even more complicated instances where royals held rank in other countries.

“You are not likely to need them should you remain within the inner palace as

you have done so far,” Fabio continued, “but if you are to become more active outside of the palace, you will need a title and freely accessible funds. To say nothing of the necessity for your own resources if you are to take on additional vassals.”

Right, I can definitely see where he’s coming from... Zenjirou thought, although regardless of the validity of the statement, it was a strange thing for “the queen’s confidant” to say.

While he was her husband, taking on titles and land even nominally, and acquiring his own funds, would lead to control moving away from Aura. Also, with those resources currently being unified under Aura, taking even a part of their earnings would mean lessening the money that Aura had easily available for herself. Furthermore, a consort gaining his own funding and lands meant that he gained military might. This was most certainly *not* something an ally of the queen should be suggesting.

Is he sounding me out? No, it’s way too blatant. It’s probably more of a warning, just put a bit indirectly.

As Zenjirou considered the situation, the secretary remained standing at attention, his narrow eyes watching every movement. If Zenjirou did show any signs of infidelity, this man would see it without a doubt. His loyalty to Aura was something that Zenjirou appreciated, but the cold, skeptical gaze on him was unpleasant and engendered a vague sense of fear.

If Zenjirou was on Aura’s side, there was no answer other than in the negative. He could tell that this wasn’t the time for a stubborn, uncooperative response and so gave an affected cough to clear his throat before declining.

“I don’t need it, and the unification of assets and power are necessary for the good of the royal family.”

“Yet did you not resolve yourself to leave the inner palace to aid Her Majesty? Pardon my bluntness, but despite being her spouse, and being seen as a member of the immediate royal line, you will be limited in your utility without such resources, no?”

His voice was flat and his face emotionless as he spoke provocatively. It naturally fanned the flames of Zenjirou’s anger, causing the emotion to

temporarily override his wariness and fear of the man in front of him as he offered a heated reply.

“And if that comes to be the case, it is a matter that she and I shall discuss. You have no right to supersede her and suggest it to me yourself.” He regretted the words as soon as they left his lips, thinking that he’d gone too far, but it was too late.

Surprisingly, the harshness and undisguised anger seemed to satisfy the secretary.

“Indeed. My apologies,” the elder murmured, his mask ever so slightly askew and a hint of a smile about his lips as he gave a deep bow of his head.



Several hours later, when the light coming in through the window had taken on a slight sunset glow, Fabio entered the office where Aura was carrying out her lighter duties.

“Your Majesty, I have returned.”

Aura remained seated and merely glanced at him. “Good work, Fabio. You too, Alejandro; you may depart.”

The sober young man, second secretary Alejandro, responded by handing a sheaf of drake parchment to Fabio.

“Sir, the minutes from today.”

“Very well. I shall relieve you now.”

“Thank you, sir.”

The younger secretary gave a bow after handing over the document and left the room. As the door closed with a thud behind him, Fabio turned back to the queen where she sat writing.

“How was Alejandro’s work, Your Majesty?”

Aura’s ballpoint pen stopped and she moved her gaze from the page on the desk to the man before her.

“Not bad. There is a bit of life to him, unlike yourself. He still lacks

‘responsiveness,’ however, and while he would be tempered by assisting me were I well, he can currently only act as a substitute.”

“Understood,” the secretary answered with a slight shrug at the harsh review. “I shall redouble his training until his work is satisfactory.”

The younger man’s instruction was Fabio’s personal responsibility as the lead secretary. Considering their long association, Aura could imagine the zeal he would bring to his training and felt somewhat sympathetic towards the young secretaries. Yet it was a fact that Alejandro’s work had been insufficient.

“Please do. So, how did things progress on your end?”

Unflustered by the sudden change of subject, the middle-aged man answered “responsively.” “The ceremony affirming Knight Natalio’s fealty was conducted without incident. Sir Zenjirou has already returned to the inner palace.”

Aura let out a relieved breath at the report. “At least there is that. I would hear your impression of him. From your perspective, how did my husband appear?”

It had been nearly half a year since Zenjirou had arrived, and while the question was overdue, her husband had spent the majority of his time in the inner palace, so he’d had very little time to interact with Fabio. But as he had now decided to take on activities outside of the inner palace, even if only the bare minimum, she needed to know exactly what her ineffable retainer thought of him.

He appeared to have an answer already prepared. “Very well. He seems to have acclimatized to moderating his expressions and actions, so I would judge that you may leave public appearances to him without any major concerns. His etiquette is also passable, and while I have many instances that I would identify as lapses, they are all within an acceptable range. I would imagine there is only a small chance he would misstep on that front, even outside,” he said, the stream of thoughts cutting off promptly at the final word of the sentence. He gave a slight shrug and added, “He also rejected taking any of your holdings outright.”

Aura grimaced at his blunt admission and covered her face with a hand. “Yet again, you insist on provoking... Still, land and titles. It is indeed worth

consideration when thinking about his future activities,” she mused, moving a hand to prop her chin up as she thought the matter over.

“Please discuss that in depth with Sir Zenjirou,” said her retainer, the slight lift of a smile twisting his lips. “After all, that is a matter a mere secretary ‘should not supersede his queen’ on.”

Fabio’s tone let her infer that Zenjirou had said as much and she let out a small laugh. “That does indeed sound like something my prudent husband would say. It does make things easier for me, though. It may be worth considering granting him a title to add some weight to his words in the public eye.”

Despite Aura’s favorable impression, Zenjirou hadn’t actively been trying to be prudent. He was just naturally aware that, while they were equals in private, there was a clear superior and subordinate in public. Three years of working in an office had shown him just how easily a group could be led astray if they lacked proper information sharing and a unified chain of command.

“With his position, inheriting the mantle of the duchy of Valentia should cause no trouble.”

Aura maintained her smile at his provocation even as she spoke in a menacingly low tone. “Fabio, refrain from testing me. Regardless of your concerns, I have no intention of granting him real power on that level. While I remain on the throne, the duchy of Valentia and the county of Potosi will remain under my control, and I shall not forfeit them.”

“A wise decision,” he answered, showing no shame at her rebuke.

Valentia had the most prosperous port in the kingdom, and Potosi housed the best silver mine. Having the assets under direct royal control strengthened their influence unlike in feudalistic states. Forfeiting those two great resources, even to her husband, would be a foolish move.

“However, you cannot rush back and forth to them while pregnant, and leaving everything to the magistrates carries risks of its own.”

Aura scowled at his point but nodded. “That is true. If my husband learns teleportation magic, then regardless of the title, I would like to entrust him with

its administration.”

The reason their remote holdings, usually hotbeds for corruption and sedition, could be managed so easily was due to the teleportation magic the royals had access to. Carrying out such schemes under the nose of someone who could appear without warning to inspect you required a rather large amount of bravery and wits.

Currently, however, the only wielder of such a spell was Aura herself, thus the reason they wished for Zenjirou to learn that magic and have many children of direct lineage with her.

“Yes, I believe he would excel at such work. And yet his greatest ‘work’ is, as ever, expanding your bloodline.”

“I suppose. Fortunately, that is going well. I have yet to experience morning sickness today, and Doctor Michel says that I have passed the worst of it,” Aura announced with her happiest expression of the day so far.

“Heartening indeed. I believe you had an audience with the envoy from the Twin Kingdoms today. How was it?” he asked, changing the topic.

The diplomatic issues with the Twin Kingdoms concerned Zenjirou’s latent potential for enchantment magic and what to do about it. They had just begun private meetings to reach some form of compromise.

“As things stand now, there seems to be little likelihood of them trying to pose restrictions on our child. Although if he has children with another, they will certainly intervene.”

As she spoke, she leaned back in her chair and rolled her neck to combat the stiffness. It was roughly the outcome they had expected to begin with.

Agreeing, the secretary inquired further. “Regardless, your child will doubtless have remnants of blood from the Sharou royal family. Will they be satisfied with merely ensuring that Sir Zenjirou takes no concubines?”

Aura shrugged, shaking her head. “Likely not. Frankly, they seem to be intending to marry him into a branch line... with the proviso that any children from the union be taken in by them, of course. This is by no means definite, but my impressions suggest that rather than keeping enchantment magic away

from our country, they are prioritizing the acquisition of space-time magic for themselves.”

Under such circumstances, the Sharous too would have a royal with bloodlines from both families, most likely aiming to be even with their Capuan counterparts. At least, that was their excuse. Aura’s kingdom had its own excuses.

It was not yet definitively known whether Zenjirou had inherited Sharou blood, so allowing things to move in that direction without question could potentially end with the flat-out theft of space-time magic. And even if it proved true, they had not stolen the bloodline purposefully, so there should be no obligation to make any more concessions than were truly necessary.

Furthermore, from a purely logical standpoint, the Twin Kingdoms had already “blessed” their marriage, and they had no right to now find fault with Zenjirou’s heritage. Aura, however, knew that international politics never ran smoothly.

“I wonder where the compromise will fall,” Fabio mused.

“I cannot say. It is hard to know at present. We will likely talk past each other for a while longer. With lineal magic on the line, we both have far too much that we are unwilling to let go of. The single saving grace is that they seem to agree that war is an absolutely final resort,” she replied, still sitting back and rolling her neck.

The Kingdom of Capua and the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle were among the biggest countries in the region, reigning supreme over the Southern Continent. Both countries were well aware that playing with fire could cause more than some minor burns. The risks were far greater than an immaterial honor; however, their lineal magics, the foundations of their power, were on the line. It was unlikely that they would find an easy compromise.

“It might not even be resolved during your generation,” the secretary pointed out, voicing a realistic concern.

“I would rather put it to rest now. Such issues tend to seem increasingly valid from both sides as time passes, and we will have to surrender something. I would prefer to avoid a great war in my child’s generation.”

That said, she could not bind her country to a disadvantageous agreement, either; it would weaken her power base and risk future domestic conflicts.

“There is nothing we can do but acknowledge that it will be drawn out. My own body will hinder me until the birth, and rushing into an unfavorable settlement has its own dangers. The potential leaking of the secret will also be problematic. Can you imagine if Pujol or his like heard of this?”

Fabio gave a slight sigh of agreement. “They would gladly ply Sir Zenjirou with concubines, actively attempting to steal the enchantment magic.”

The ambitious general would never allow the opportunity to possess another country’s lineal magic pass him by. Even more troubling was that his suggestion would undoubtedly be supported by the majority of the kingdom’s nobles—that was how attractive the idea of a merged bloodline was. There was a strong possibility that the moderates, who were more conscious of the threat posed by a conflict with the Twin Kingdoms, would be overruled.

“So, our choice is to proceed carefully, right to the end,” Aura murmured, unconsciously stroking her stomach where her child grew.

Chapter 6 — A Duel Called Negotiations

Several months had passed and Queen Aura was currently in the midst of yet another discussion with the Twin Kingdoms' envoy.

It was the coolest part of the year, and the gentle sunbeams didn't push the temperature above twenty-five degrees, even at the height of the afternoon heat. Those beams now fell in through the wide-open window, bathing the room in a comfortable illumination. Aura's morning sickness had abated, and her stomach had visibly grown, so she was wearing a looser red dress than she normally would and was seated on a sofa as she calmly spoke with the envoy across from her.

"I am, as you can see, with child, so I apologize for my somewhat slovenly appearance."

"Not at all," the envoy returned formally, bowing as custom dictated. "I am honored that you would grant me this audience."

He was a middle-aged man, clad in the formal wear of the Twin Kingdoms, colored in a pattern of purple and white. He was a noble of middling rank, without peerage or lands, but the responsibility being entrusted to him here spoke of the confidence that had been placed in his personality and skills. Even sitting across from a grand country's ruler as he currently was, the man's face was placid and composed.

He had arrived two months prior, and this was the fifth time that Aura had accepted an audience with him. Considering the weight of the subject, this being their fifth meeting was actually treating it somewhat lightly, but when prioritizing secrecy above all else, there was little choice. A monarch like Aura and a mere diplomat, even one from the Twin Kingdoms, meeting so frequently in private would allow people to infer that there was some sort of diplomatic situation being hidden from them. The two countries' overall goals and claims clashed, but the secrecy alone was something that both were in agreement on.

"I am sure you are aware, but I lack the time to dedicate a long meeting to

this. Let us proceed with some haste. The Twin Kingdoms gave their blessings when my husband and I were wed. I presume you have no intention of rescinding that?" she demanded, getting right to the heart of the matter.

"Of course, our country sincerely wishes for the best in your marriage, Your Majesty. The words were not false in the slightest," he answered without hesitation, even as he bowed his head humbly once again.

The Sharous lacked the desire to rescind their congratulations, implying that they did not intend to interfere with the child that she and Zenjirou would have together. The statement itself essentially accomplished one of Aura's goals. There was at least no real concern about interference in the line of succession for Capua. It went without saying that such a pledge had her breathing a mental sigh of relief. This was her greatest achievement in the past few months.

She had no chance to relax, however, as the diplomat continued, politely cutting across her. "Sir Zenjirou is recognized as a member of the Capuan royal family. Another country must not meddle with the future that such a person offers the kingdom. We understand that. But we would also like you to understand our own country's position."

"I am aware of what you wish to say," the queen answered with a nod, her expression growing severe.

With Zenjirou now recognized as the prince consort by their neighboring countries, the Twin Kingdoms would ordinarily have no legitimate claim to his lineage. However, with the risk of lineal magics spreading beyond their borders, they could use the potential issue it created to gain legitimacy by way of public opinion... to say nothing of the fact that the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle was the most powerful force at the center of the continent.

Given the slight risk of inciting a war, Aura couldn't unilaterally push her own interests. It grated, but she would have to make concessions. She placed her folded hands atop her stomach and lowered her voice conspiratorially.

"My husband is aware of your position and has stated that he will have no children with any woman other than myself. If you were to state that you would not interfere with my children, would that not be sufficient?"

At present, Capua had only two people who had inherited their kingdom's

lineal magic, so purposefully restricting the spread of that blood was more than sufficient as a compromise. Aura certainly had no intention of conceding any further.

But the envoy had a different perspective. “That is something I am glad to hear. However, a royal may not always choose his relations freely. What would happen if circumstances came to pass such that Sir Zenjirou was *required* to take a concubine, and the resulting child inherits enchantment magic?” he replied without hesitation.

Aura’s relaxed smile remained fixed in place, but she cursed mentally. The man was correct; a promise to not take a concubine could not be guaranteed forevermore from a royal. They would need some form of secret agreement that detailed penalties for breaking their word.

In truth, Aura had never actually intended to honor such a promise forever. She would not be so foolish as to provoke the Twin Kingdoms without reason but had considered it something she could wave off with an apology if it came down to it. She had never expected such a blatant warning from him, but the man clearly had a significant amount of courage.

Still, Aura was not easily thrown enough to accept it without protest. “That is a hypothetical of a hypothetical. I see no reason to go that far at present, do you?”

The man answered in a calm tone, “Yet would you not agree that it is an eminently plausible hypothesis? It is my humble opinion that we would be better served by preventing such potential disputes before they come to pass.”

He would not falter, and Aura could tell that pushing back directly would require far more effort than was practical, so she changed her tack. “I see. There is a certain logic to it. Then I ask you this: what of the possibility of the Sharou family breaking their own word in interfering with our child? If the lineage of my husband were leaked to a member of a branch family, that family could decide to act on their own initiative. Hypothetical it may be, but it is also ‘eminently plausible,’ is it not?”

“Hmm...”

Aura’s riposte had made the man hesitate for the first time that day. It was a

petty revenge but an exceedingly effective one. Unlike the queen, who stood at the head of her country, the envoy was nothing more than a mouthpiece for his own ruling family, so he only had so much leeway.

Aura pressed further. “Well, you are quite correct. It is a matter for consideration, much like my own offered scenario.”

The wording was circuitous, but it was akin to saying that they should deal with both countries’ issues simultaneously. The simultaneity might have made it sound impartial, but that was far from being the truth. Aura could make any decisions on her own, but her visitor was a mere diplomat, so his authority was limited.

“Very well. I shall consult my kingdom as a matter of urgency.”

The man could go no further this time around.



Meanwhile, Zenjirou found himself in the reception hall as yet another ceremony took place.

He was clad in the red formal wear that still didn’t suit him. The subsidiary seat next to the empty throne was reserved for him. The throne and the consort’s seat would normally be distinct either in size or decoration but Zenjirou’s was almost identical to the queen’s. It was another way in which the kingdom’s first prince consort was proving difficult to deal with.

You can’t make the monarch’s spouse look better than the monarch. But with the monarch being a woman, you can’t have her looking better than her husband, either. She’s really in a tough spot, he thought to himself.

Holding an audience like this brought home just how difficult a position she was in. The nobles’ evaluating gazes weighed heavily on him, but if he thought of Aura facing it in her condition, doing it himself and the effort it required was nothing.

Zenjirou purposefully declined to meet anyone’s eyes as he looked over the assembled nobles awaiting the end of the ceremony, holding himself like a well-mannered doll. The ceremonies that he attended as Aura’s representative were all fundamentally alike; they just needed someone with a royal title to be

present, and that was about the sum of it. Anything that required complex discussion or actions was dealt with by Aura directly.

I just need to stay quiet and polite, and wait for it to finish, he thought as he sat upright on the red secondary throne made of stone. His sole duty was to raise a hand and greet the nobles when the officials chairing the meeting called his name. *Should be any minute*, he decided, preparing himself as he listened to the presiding official's speech.

"Today, Sir Zenjirou has graced us with his presence as a representative of the royal Capuan family. Everyone, join your hands for His Majesty's presence!"

Zenjirou's breath caught in his throat at the unexpected statement. There was no room for him to be surprised here, though; a glance at the official's face suggested that he had not said it maliciously, but that was exactly why he could not let them lie.

His role would ordinarily be to silently raise his right hand. He was playing it by ear here, and wasn't certain of the correct action, but with the situation requiring acknowledgment, he needed to offer some form of response. He put his hand on the decorative bronze sword at his waist and gave his reprimand, speaking loudly to mask his nerves.

"An amendment! I sit here not as a representative of the royal family; I sit here as a representative of the one queen of Capua, Her Majesty Aura!"

His words were far removed from his usual tone, sharp and overbearing. Of course, they were not spoken from the heart; they were simply the best he could manage on the spur of the moment, making an effort to redirect things as best he could. However, placing a hand upon his sword showed that, depending on the situation, he was willing to mete out punishment.

The young official, not being privy to Zenjirou's panicked thoughts, couldn't bear it. The unexpected rebuke from a royal made his face drain of color as he hurriedly remedied the mistake.

"M-My apologies! Allow me to correct myself: Queen Aura's husband, Sir Zenjirou, is here as her representative!"

Seeing that the man was on the verge of fainting, Zenjirou wanted to

apologize for going too far. In truth, it might even look to someone who didn't know the circumstances that it was a case of a superior finding excessive fault with an inferior. And indeed there were more than a few looks sent his way from the nobles staring up at the stage. However, given Zenjirou's position, it wasn't something that he could ignore. If he was here "as Queen Aura's representative" then that meant he was here at her pleasure. On the other hand, if he was serving "as a representative of the royal family," they could later request his presence directly rather than going through Aura herself.

No matter what, Zenjirou had to avoid using his position without Aura's permission. It wasn't like the metaphor of a butterfly flapping its wings, but the best way to avoid a problem was to avoid creating the precedent.

Crap... I expected it a bit, but I was accepted as royalty way sooner than I thought. Purposely averting his eyes from the clamor of the gathered crowd, he forced down his anxiety.

Once the ceremony was over, it was customary to hold a buffet. Zenjirou had avoided attending such events as much as possible, to avoid the potential pitfalls of casual conversation, but for his current goals, they were a necessary sacrifice. Having changed from his second ceremonial dress into a lighter third outfit, he began walking around the dining hall where the guests were taking lunch.

The customs of the country held that those of lower status could not freely interact with those of a higher status, so to fulfill his goals, he would have to address people himself. He wandered the red carpet, wearing the unfamiliar cloth shoes, looking for suitable targets.

"Oh, I believe you are Count Balogna, are you not? I have heard from Her Majesty that you are a man of culture and refinement in addition to your efforts in office," he called out to the first man that he recognized and knew the name of.

"Oh, Sir Zenjirou, I am honored by your praise. It pleases me that I am able to speak with you in such a place. I was truly ecstatic to see you at the event."

"Ah, it was nothing. It was a direct order from my beloved wife, Queen Aura, herself. As her humble servant and her husband, such duties are the least I can

do,” he said, stressing that he was there solely per the queen’s request.

“Oh, indeed? Still, you seem to have been out of the inner palace more as of late. I suppose everyone wishes to spread their wings from time to time.”

Buffets might be less strict compared to other government affairs, but his wording was only barely acceptable, and Zenjirou scowled mentally, his mind working overtime to think of a suitable answer.

“Not in the slightest. When Her Majesty is busy and away from the inner palace, I almost feel like a candle without a flame. This is simply to distract myself from the loneliness,” he answered with a grin.

Is that good enough? All I really need to do is show that I’m head over heels for Aura.

The noble gave an exaggerated laugh, his shoulders shaking, unaware of Zenjirou’s thoughts. “Ahaha,” he guffawed, “My, my, you truly do adore Her Majesty.”

“I do indeed. I never thought myself to be so single-minded, and yet she and our child fill my mind, night and day. Shamefully, it is impinging upon my work; what a conundrum.”

I’m a lovestruck fool... utterly lovestruck... he told himself over and over, temporarily abandoning his usually treasured shame and self-respect as he laughed deeply.

The looks now focused on him seemed to prove the tactic’s worth, as the gazes of the nobles became tinged with disappointment and scorn one by one.



That evening, when Aura returned to the inner palace after concluding negotiations with the Twin Kingdoms’ envoy, her beloved husband had still not returned. It was a rare occurrence for her to be back before him.

“Ah, yes, I remember now that he is representing me at a ceremony today,” she mused aloud, picking up an orange bath towel from a basket in the corner and settling onto the sofa. Loosening the dress from her stomach, she softly placed the towel over herself. “Phew...”

Due to her pregnancy, she had chosen a dress that would press on her as little as possible, but her position meant that a certain standard was required while out in public. Loosening the dress like this allowed her to breathe a sigh of relief, and the bath towel was to stop her stomach, now that it had grown to prominence, from getting cold.

Slumped back against the sofa, she suddenly felt the dryness of her throat and raised her voice.

“Maid.”

“Yes, Your Majesty?” a maid answered, appearing immediately from a neighboring room where she had been stationed.

Aura moved only her eyes to look at the humble servant. “My throat is parched; fetch something to drink. Oh, and a light snack as well.”

“Right away, Ma’am,” the woman bowed, briskly walking to the corner and opening the fridge. She poured a mixture of fruit juice, water, and sugar into a glass and placed it onto the table. “Please allow some time for the snack. Is there anything specific you would like?”

Aura pondered for a moment before answering. “Hmm... yes, something sweet would be nice. Not fruit, though; and there is no need to rush.”

“Very well, Ma’am; I will see to it,” the maid replied, bowing and leaving the room.

Alone once more, Aura picked up the drink and raised it to her mouth. The bittersweet liquid refreshed her throat, and she breathed a sigh of satisfaction.

“Life has become easier now that my husband has grown used to the staff.”

Usually, Zenjirou disliked other people entering his private space, so Aura had done her utmost since their wedding to avoid summoning the maids to their chambers. But he had been more considerate of her preferences since the pregnancy and had allowed them to wait close by.

It had been a compromise on his behalf, but he seemed to have recently grown more comfortable with their presence, and as it was normal for Aura, she was grateful for that. Of course, if Zenjirou ultimately decided that he

couldn't get used to it and asked for them to stay outside, she would accept it, but she felt that she could impinge upon the kindness of her husband while she was with child.

As she put the glass back on the table, she heard the door clatter open behind her. For a moment, she thought it was the maid with her snacks, but if that were the case, the young woman would have knocked. There was only one person who would enter without announcing himself.

She turned in her seat to look and found her assumption verified.

"I'm back, Aura. How're you?"

He had attended the event in her stead and was therefore wearing the ceremonial dress of a male royal. A red vest with gold thread embroidered on it rested above a white tunic, with baggy pants covering his legs as he stood in the entrance. He had gradually become accustomed to the formal clothing as he had started attending more events in her place.

Seeing her husband, her voice naturally brightened as she answered. "There are no issues. My morning sickness has lessened recently and was not present at all during my duties today. It has put me in a much more pleasant mood."

"That's good, at least," he answered with a smile, closing the door behind him and trotting over to a corner where a clothes hanger was.

He put the red outfit onto the hanger and nimbly took out a pitcher of fruit juice, pouring himself a drink before dropping down next to Aura.

"Phew," he sighed. The temperature itself wasn't too high, but the unfamiliar state function had caused him to sweat all over. He stuck a finger under his collar and shook the top to fan himself.

Two months had passed since he had started standing in for her, and yet he still couldn't say that he was used to it. Aura watched her husband sprawl out on the sofa now that he had been released from the stress of the event.

"And you? You were at an event this evening, correct? Was there anything of concern?"

They were the same questions she had asked each day since he had started

working outside of the inner palace. Even Aura herself thought that she was worrying a bit too much, but it was better to do so than to be out of sync if any problems arose. Fortunately, Zenjirou felt the same and never took offense. He always answered with a negative and a smile.

Today, however, his face twisted and he gave a different answer, his expression earnest. “Yeah, about that, there was something I was wondering...”

“Hmm?” *What could be the problem?* she asked herself. Growing increasingly nervous about his demeanor, Aura adjusted herself and waited soberly for his answer.

Zenjirou met her gaze and began to explain. “When I was introduced today, they said that I was ‘a representative of the royal family’ rather than ‘a representative of Her Majesty.’” He quickly added that he had promptly corrected them.

“That... is indeed a slight problem,” Aura answered, a similar grimace on her own lips.

Zenjirou had been representing her for several months now and had maintained his position as nothing more than her standin while she was pregnant. If he had been present as a male royal, specifically, then regardless of Aura being the queen, he would have been seen as more important than her simply because he was a man. It was inevitable, the country’s culture being what it was.

Of course, even with her pregnancy, Aura had far more appearances to manage. He was her representative only for relatively unimportant matters where he wouldn’t need to act of his own accord. Even so, a male royal acting in the queen’s stead had nobles murmuring about a transfer of power. The drop in the duties that she carried out as a result of her pregnancy had made them uneasy and unhappy about a woman reigning over Capua.

The two of them locked eyes and spoke simultaneously.

“This will be an issue if it is intentional.”

“This’ll probably be a problem if it’s not intentional.”

The two statements sounded similar at first, but the husband and wife’s

thoughts were completely contrary, and they looked questioningly at each other after a brief silence.

“Huh?”

“Ah...”

Zenjirou was the first to speak. “Uhh... why would it being intentional be cause for concern? Could you explain?”

“A purposeful mistake would be a clear effort to estrange us. How could that not be concerning? Why do you believe it would be a problem only if it were *not* purposeful?” she asked after explaining her own thoughts.

Unlike Aura, Zenjirou’s explanation was nowhere near as smooth and well-worded, but he managed to get his point across nonetheless. “Sure, well, if it wasn’t on purpose, it’d mean that people have unconsciously started to see me like, well, a royal in my own right, rather than your representative. That’d mean because of this country’s values, you’d get people unhappy with me being your puppet, I thought.”

Even for the queen and her consort, the patriarchy was firmly in place in the Kingdom of Capua, and the woman taking a leading role while the man acted as her subordinate wouldn’t be appreciated by the locals. So far, the country’s usual stance had been primarily overlooked due to Aura’s own achievements and the doubt that Zenjirou’s origins cast upon him. But it was possible that a lack of care could see the formation of opposing factions backing the queen and her consort respectively.

Worse, the people trying to remove Aura from the throne and install Zenjirou would have some validity to their claims. In this world, being royalty meant being a wielder of lineal magic, and the number of royals was part of the country’s strength. The only royals currently in Capua were Aura and Zenjirou, so it was inevitable that more children would be demanded of them, which meant that Aura would be pregnant and giving birth several times over the course of their marriage. With that in mind, it would be efficient to have Zenjirou publicly handling the running of the country and Aura dedicating herself to bearing healthy children.

Aura could see the logic. It made sense... if Zenjirou had had political abilities

on the same level that she did. She understood what he was trying to say.

She leaned her pregnant frame back into the sofa and let out a deep sigh. “I see; you mean to say that an unconscious change in how you are perceived by the masses is a greater threat than the hidden maneuverings of a portion of the people.”

“Yeah, I do. Either way, now that I’m in the public eye, it’s just a matter of time,” he answered with a negligent shrug, leaning back as well.

“Indeed it is, so we shall have to ensure that we share information to prevent people from pitting us against each other.”

“Yup. We should make sure I don’t end up in a position where I can freely use my own authority and resources. If you suggest it, you’ll gain their displeasure for ‘impinging on your husband’s rights,’ so it’d probably be better for me to make it look like I’m ‘passing on the troublesome stuff,’” he suggested, still willing to take on more of the inevitable infamy himself, even after already lowering the public’s opinion by refusing concubines.

“Yes... that may be the safest option,” she answered with a frown. He was right, and it would be best for the royal family in the long run, so it was hard to disagree. Still, that would mean giving him the reputation of being a slothful individual who hated work in addition to being pathetically lovestruck. All together, it would make him appear to be a “lazy fool who lost his head over a woman.”

Of course, he had fallen for Aura at a glance and ran away to another world to escape his job, so it was a surprisingly accurate assessment.

“I consulted Fabio on the way back, and he agreed that it’s the safest option as well,” he added, encouraging his wife as she sat there, reluctant to agree.

With the person it would actually affect and her confidant offering the same solution, the queen could not refute them, and she could see its efficacy if she ignored her guilt.

“Very well; I shall once more rely on your goodwill, then. However, it does make me glad that you seem to be working well with Fabio. He is certainly skilled but by no means sociable, so I was somewhat concerned.”

Zenjirou's gaze rocketed off to the side at that, and he answered while he was still looking away.

"Yeah; we're working together well but not getting on well..."

Aura felt a smile part her lips as her husband failed to hide his displeasure. "And that is a good thing. I would be unable to bear it if you possessed a personality where you could 'get on well.' I would never be able to relax if such men were lurking both at work and at home."

Her tone had been joking at the start, but her remarks ended up all but being spat out. Apparently, her confidant's blunt nature had worn on her more than she'd realized. Her tone let Zenjirou see that the two of them held similar feelings towards the man, and he turned to face her again.

"Yeah, one of him's enough."

"Yes, although we *do* need one of him. While I may wish to strike him from time to time, those willing to tell a royal about unpleasant matters without fear are indispensable. There are even fewer willing to do so for benevolent reasons rather than malicious ones. Do try to work with him as best you can."

"I get it; I'll do what I can," Zenjirou nodded, not trying to hide the grimace on his face.

Chapter 7 — Enacting the Secret Treaty

One month later, Zenjirou was seated in the living room in the inner palace, typing out the contents of the secret treaty that his wife was dictating to him.

The seasons had passed, and they had now entered a period that corresponded with spring in Japan. This time of year in Western Randlion was commonly called “the rainy season,” and in keeping with the name was often spent with roughly half a month of continuous cloud cover and over ten days of rain.

It wasn’t the gentle pitter-patter you might imagine from Japan’s seasonal equivalent, either, but an endless downpour. Of course, while there were risks of flooding, the extreme weather also cultured Capua’s greenery as the blessings of the rainfall were left within the ground, so it wasn’t all bad.

Today was no exception, and a torrent of water had been falling from the sky since morning. The winds grew stronger with the changing season, so the windows were boarded up tight. All this meant that despite it being noon, the room was dark enough that it was difficult for Zenjirou to see the keyboard in front of him without some extra light. Of course, he had six LED lamps to stave off the darkness, but that actually gave the impression that nighttime was approaching instead.

“...then, as recompense, the Twin Kingdoms will pay the Kingdom of Capua three thousand silver pieces. That is all. Did you follow everything? I can read it out once more,” Aura offered, having finished reading from the drake parchment in her hand as she lounged in her red maternity dress.

A brief clatter on the keyboard followed her words as Zenjirou remained facing away from her before replying a moment later. “Nah, it’s fine. I... *should*... have it all. Can I read it back to you to make sure I haven’t missed anything?”

“Very well.”

At his wife's reply, he adjusted himself atop his chair and began to read the words that he'd just typed out. "Here we go:

"Clause one: Zenjiro Capua (Party A) shall henceforth have children with none other than Aura Capua (Party B).

"Clause two: The Twin Kingdoms shall not intercede in the affairs of Party B's direct descendants.

"Clause three: should the Kingdom of Capua contravene clause one, and Party A has a child with a person other than Party B, the Twin Kingdoms shall have the right to investigate the lineal magic aptitude of that child (Party C).

"Clause four: should Party C be found to have an aptitude for enchantment magic, they shall reside in the Twin Kingdoms for a period of three years once they reach fifteen years of age.

"Clause five: during this residency, should Party C be forced into exile, the Kingdom of Capua may still welcome Party C back to their own country.

"Clause six: should Party C wish to remain in the Twin Kingdoms of their own accord once the three years have elapsed, the Kingdom of Capua is not permitted to prevent this.

"Clause seven: after Party C's return, any knowledge that they have acquired during their residency in the Twin Kingdoms may only be shared within the royal family of Capua.

"Clause eight: should the Twin Kingdoms contravene clause two and intercede in the affairs of Party B's offspring..."

Zenjiro continued to read through the Japanese text on the screen. Put simply, the contract covered his potential offspring and the interference of the Twin Kingdoms in Capuan affairs, placing conditions on those matters from the perspectives of each country.

A brief examination made Zenjiro think that Aura must have put in a great deal of effort to get these agreements in place. Seeing the consequences for breaking the promise that he would not have children with anyone else written out so clearly made him feel that both sides assumed the conditions would not be adhered to. In fact, a significant part of the contract consisted of defining

exactly *how* a child of his with a woman other than Aura—one who could use enchantment magic—would be dealt with.

Zenjirou himself had no intention of sleeping with any other women, and seeing it in writing that their child would not be disadvantaged meant that he didn't have any real complaints about the endeavor. However, it didn't mean that he had no misgivings. This secret treaty had around a dozen clauses, and Zenjirou was accustomed to the strict legalese of a modern contract, so it felt rather broad to him. The thought prompted him to turn in his chair and look at his wife.

"What is it, Zenjirou? Do you have any concerns?" she asked, smiling as she sat up slightly.

Her smile lent credence to his gut instinct. *Right, both of them probably added "convenient" leeway into the document.*

He found it difficult to believe that either party would have failed to notice the holes in a contract that he felt was "broad" after a simple glance when they'd spent over half a year negotiating it.

Zenjirou's conclusion, however, was an instance of him slightly overestimating the royalty in this world. Aura and her counterparts from the Twin Kingdoms were intelligent men and women who were much more well-versed in the art of negotiation than Zenjirou was, but the customs of this world simply didn't include defining such agreements in great detail as some countries on Earth tended to do. Zenjirou's train of thought, where all plausible outcomes and the necessary steps to prevent any related detrimental consequences, was fundamentally alien to them.

Well, whatever; I'm sure Aura or Fabio will say something if there's a problem.

"Actually, wait a sec, there are some things I want to go over with you," he said, checking the A4 paper in the tray and sending what he'd just read to the printer.

"Right," he continued a moment later, plucking up the printout and moving to sit next to his wife.

With her swollen stomach, she couldn't lean forward. Making sure not to

disturb her posture, he held out the translation to accompany the local writing on the drake parchment before offering his thoughts.

“This is the biggest thing. If clauses two and three conflicted in the future...”

Despite her surprise at her husband’s comments on the intricacies of the agreement, she answered him dutifully. “Hmm, yes, then clearly clause two would...”

But Zenjirou wasn’t satisfied with her explanation and followed up. “It’s not specified, though, so if they were to insist...”

“Quite true. It is as you say...”

Their discussion continued until a maid came to inform them that it was time to eat.



The next afternoon, Zenjirou was walking through the palace alongside Aura after lunch. His cloth shoes had leather soles, but he was far from surefooted, having felt like he was walking on a sponge for some time. His hand was joined with hers under the pretense of offering her support, and the sensation of their intertwined fingers was the only reason he was keeping his cool.

She seemed to understand his feelings and would periodically tighten her grip to encourage him. He was grateful for that, but it still felt a little pathetic.

I can’t exactly avoid feeling nervous in this situation, though. The last time I felt this anxious was when they first gave me the lead on a contract, he told himself reflexively.

His responsibilities were far less intense now than back then, but the context made everything much heavier. If he could, he’d have taken some deep breaths to calm himself down. If he had been alone apart from Aura, he would have doubtlessly done so. Unfortunately, that was not the case. Inner sanctum of the royal palace or not, the queen and prince consort were not left unattended.

Accompanying the pair were four guards in front of them and four more behind them to make eight in total. The men were equipped with white leather armor and ostentatiously-adorned short spears. They looked more ceremonial

than combat-capable, but the armors' defensive attributes and the spear tips' sharpness were no lie.

Seeing the glint on the spearheads made Zenjirou gulp as a shiver ran down his back. Intellectually, he was aware that they were there to protect him, but he couldn't relax while surrounded by people equipped to kill others.

In fairness, I guess it's an insanely small number of guards when you consider our positions...

If they had not been inside the palace and Zenjirou had instead been moving around outside their private walls, he would have had ten times as much protection. In fact, while acting as Aura's proxy, he'd been given five times as many guards even within the palace proper.

While he was preoccupied with these thoughts, the soldiers in front of them came to a halt in front of a door. The front row stood at attention, two on either side, with their spears held vertically.

Zenjirou and Aura stopped as well. Behind this door waited the envoy from the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle. Zenjirou naturally turned to his wife and their eyes met in the silence before she gave a slight nod. He returned the motion and, restraining the urge to open the door himself, spoke to the guards on either side of it.

"Open it."

"Yes, sir!" one of them answered, carrying out his order.

Zenjirou took a careful breath to make sure that no one picked up on his nervousness, then entered with a purposefully slow pace.

"It is a great honor to meet you, Sir Zenjirou. I am a diplomat from the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle, and my name is Mareno Militello. I appreciate the opportunity to make your acquaintance."

Zenjirou gave a calm nod at the middle-aged man across the table from him, replying from his own chair, "I am Zenjirou, husband to the monarch of Capua, Queen Aura."

This was how he always introduced himself, emphasizing that he was here not

as an individual royal but as the queen's spouse. Regardless of whether the envoy across from him realized this or not, he gave a slight chuckle with a deferential expression on his face as he offered a bow.

"Now, my husband having been introduced, let us move on to the main topic," Aura prompted. "We are short on time."

Although she looked somewhat slovenly, leaning back in her chair to keep her stomach out of the way, her words and their tone were clearly those of someone well-accustomed to giving orders.

"At once, Your Majesty," the diplomat agreed, bowing again, this time to her.

"Hmm," Aura murmured, placing her chin in her hand, her roundness having started to bother her recently, "shall we begin with our ostensible business, or the business of real importance?"

"Well, let us deal with the public matter first and finish with it quickly. The rings you requested have arrived," their guest stated, placing two items wrapped in thick purple cloths onto the table. It was a pair, three brilliant-cut diamonds set within gold... Impossible to mistake. They were the wedding rings that Zenjirou had bought back on Earth.

With "normal sight," they looked much the same as before, but the last year spent training with Octavia meant that he could now see mana, and the rings were shining with it. The light coming from them was insignificant compared to that which emanated from Aura and himself, but this was the first time he had seen such mana surrounding simple inanimate objects.

The public reason for Aura and Zenjirou meeting the Twin Kingdoms' diplomat together like this was to officially receive the enchanted rings they had requested. Considering Zenjirou usually only left the inner palace when he was acting as the queen's representative, such an excuse was needed.

As Zenjirou looked on in interest, the envoy smoothly explained the jewelry's effects. "Her Majesty's ring has been imbued with an ignite spell, and Sir Zenjirou's has been imbued with a water creation spell. The ignite spell was performed by Prince Francesco, and the water creation by Princess Margarita."

Aura was the one to respond. "It is an honor that the prince and princess

would both choose to lend their gifts. I shall have a letter of thanks made up for them.”

Both of the royals were famed enchanters, and the country was not foolish enough to take shortcuts in light of the ongoing hidden conflict.

“I shall deliver any such missives,” the visitor replied. Now came the real matter. “As we are pressed for time, I believe we should transition to the core issue at hand. This is the final draft of the treaty. Please look it over, and affix your signatures should it prove satisfactory.” He carefully spread out the drake parchment on the table before them.

The pact may have been a secret, but this was an official document and was therefore made from high-quality parchment. The near-white pale green scroll contrasted starkly with the black ink upon it.

At present, Zenjirou had only the reading comprehension level of a middle-schooler in English, but the characters were so beautifully drawn that even he could see the skill in the writing.

Again, it was Aura who spoke. “Unfortunately, my husband cannot yet read our characters. Read it aloud, if you would.”

“Ah, of course. I shall do so; forgive my rudeness,” he replied, reaching out a finger to point to each clause in turn. “I shall begin.

“Clause one: Zenjirou Capua (Party A) shall henceforth have children with none other than Aura Capua (Party B).

“Clause two: The Twin Kingdoms shall not intercede in the affairs of Party B’s direct descendants.

“Clause three: should the Kingdom of Capua contravene clause one, and Party A has a child with a person other than Party B, the Twin Kingdoms shall have the right to investigate the lineal magic...”

Zenjirou was sitting and straining his ears to avoid missing anything, doing his utmost to keep his expression blank. There was nothing strange in the envoy’s words so far. The slight change in the man’s voice came only towards the end.

“...will pay the Kingdom of Capua three thousand silver pieces...”

This was the end of the contract that Aura had read to him yesterday. However, there was still one more clause beneath the diplomat's extended finger. The man fell silent for a moment, a muscle jumping in his cheek as he pointed at the final line and read it out loud.

"Supplemental provision: should clauses two and three conflict, clause two will take precedence... That is all."

It was what Zenjirou had proposed the night before. A resolution to a potential conflict between clauses two and three. Simply put, would the Twin Kingdoms be able to intercede if a descendant of Zenjirou and Aura married a descendant of Zenjirou and a concubine, and then had a child? According to clause two, said child would be of Aura's lineage, so they would not. However, based on clause three, such a child would be contravening the agreement, in which case the Twin Kingdoms would have a right to step in.

It probably wouldn't become relevant in their own child's generation, but such a conflict could theoretically arise among his grandchildren or great-grandchildren.

Zenjirou looked at Aura out of the corner of his eye in surprise, and she answered with a slight smile and a nod. He had brought up several loopholes in the contract, but when he had been informed that the signing would proceed as planned today, he had simply assumed that his views had been disregarded.

Did she spend the morning having this added? No one can compare to my wife.

Zenjirou was once more being taken in by the queen's dynamism, but Aura was currently having similar thoughts about him. Ordinarily, it would be natural to assume that clause two would take precedence over clause three. However, an obstinate refusal to see it that way—as Zenjirou had mentioned the night before—was certainly possible if they didn't clearly specify it now.

At the moment, the relationship between their countries was fairly even, and the Twin Kingdoms were unlikely to make such a claim. However, no one knew what the future might hold, and while she didn't want to consider it, if Capua's strength ever fell far below that of the Twin Kingdoms, their neighbors could use the third clause to interfere directly with the royal family.

To put it grandly, Zenjirou's concerns had quite possibly forestalled a future potential attack upon the kingdom. In that case, it was an impressive action on his part. But with the entire matter being classified and Aura having added the clause herself, such an achievement could not be made public.

Yet I shall have to remember it. I shall be the only one to know of his success, and I will not forget it, Aura swore to herself as she dipped the drake bone brush into the inkpot to sign the bottom of the contract.



It was late evening by the time the couple returned to the inner palace from their meeting. Upon reaching their living room, they immediately stripped out of their finery and changed into comfortable loungewear.

"We can assist you."

"Please do."

As one would expect, most of Aura's clothing had to be put on and removed with the assistance of the maids. The two servants soon had the dress she was wearing off, and then clothed her in something closer to a negligee than a maternity dress, a single piece of thin fabric. Aura, her heavy stomach more than she could deal with, quickly settled onto the sofa.

"Phew..." she sighed deeply, sinking into the soft cushions. The day had exhausted even her. She had spent the morning negotiating the final amendments and the afternoon signing and discussing the final draft.

The queen had been blessed with a strong constitution, and along with her training as a warrior, she had far and away more stamina than an ordinary woman. Even so, the process of finalizing a secret treaty that would determine the path of her kingdom while under the strain of her pregnant body had worn heavily on her.

As reluctant as ever to do anything personal in front of the maids, Zenjirou had meanwhile changed into a T-shirt and jeans in the bedroom and now walked back out to rejoin her.

"Good work today, Aura. Here, I'll get you some hot chocolate," he offered.

He added a kettle of boiling water to two tablespoons of cocoa powder in a cup, mixing it well before placing it in front of her. Then he made tea for himself, pouring the hot water over a tea bag in his cup, adding lumps of brown sugar once the color had developed, and then dropped a slice of a sour, lemon-like fruit into the drink. He usually drank his tea straight, but when he was this exhausted, he longed for a sweet and sour taste instead.

“Ah, my thanks,” Aura said, picking up the mug and sipping the sweet and frothy liquid before letting out a satisfied sigh.

Zenjirou would usually settle himself next to her, but they had things to discuss today, so he sat on the sofa across from her instead. The waiting maids bowed as one and left the room out of consideration for his inability to relax while staff was observing.

“So, can we assume this mess with the Twin Kingdoms is done for now?” he asked once he was sure the maids had gone.

Aura returned her mug to the table and nodded. “We can. At least, as long as you take no concubine, the Twin Kingdoms will likely say nothing.”

Zenjirou grimaced slightly at that. “Yeah, I thought that might be the case when I saw the treaty. I guess the nobility here still has issues with me refusing to take a concubine?” He’d suppressed his shame to push the narrative that he was thinking of nothing but Aura, but his efforts may have been in vain.

Aura shook her head at her equally exhausted husband. “Not at all; that too is much reduced at present. It would seem your actions have been effective. Those who would actively push a concubine on you have receded, and they are now focusing on who to send in as a wet nurse for our child instead,” she explained, stroking her stomach gently.

“Then—” Zenjirou began forcefully, but Aura cut him off with a shake of her head.

“No. I understand what you wish to say, but it is impossible. You would do better to abandon such naivete. We would normally be able to have three or four children, after which our future actions would not matter. However, as you are well aware, the only royals currently in this country are you and myself.

“This is an extremely unusual situation for a large kingdom. As a firm example, simply consider the Twin Kingdoms. There are twenty-three members of the Sharou family and eighteen of the Gilbelles.”

Each royal was another wielder of the country’s lineal magic. Having fewer members in your royal line meant possessing less power as a nation. The nobility’s view that the country needed more royalty was something that Aura intellectually agreed with in spite of the emotions involved.

Understanding the logic, but still hesitant to agree, Zenjirou gave an even more stubborn answer. “Uhh... so the two of us will have to get busy, huh?”

Aura couldn’t hide a reluctant smile and look of surprise at the reckless suggestion. She answered with a slightly joking tone and exaggerated shudder. “Are you trying to kill me? How many children are you suggesting I have whilst also leading this country?”

“In my world, there was an archduchess who had fifteen or sixteen children with her husband while managing to lead a large country through a war. She was called an empress.”

“And was she truly human? Are you sure her line held no blood from the ancient dragon races?” Aura frowned, a crease deepening between her eyebrows in doubt upon hearing the story. Even she could not see the tale of Austria’s former leader Maria Theresa as realistic.

“Nah, I doubt it. I think she was probably a regular human, you know?” His knowledge of European history only consisted of what he had learned during high school, so he couldn’t provide many more details, and the conversation fell off there.

Silence filled the room as Zenjirou cast about for a good topic before suddenly remembering the rings in his pocket. “Oh, right. Hey, Aura, give me your left hand?”

It was a blatant change of subject, but Aura knew that the topic of concubines was the one thing he despised, so she followed his lead. She knew that he would eventually concede, even if grudgingly, but putting it off a little longer wouldn’t matter.

“Ah, I see. Give your ring to me first, then; I wish to perform the exchange again,” she said, holding her right hand out, palm up.

“Sure.” He put his own ring on her hand and walked over to her. “Uh, you can stay where you are.” He gestured her back to her seat as she also moved to stand. Kneeling before her, he took her left hand, planning to place the ring on her ring finger.

“Not there. My fingers are currently swollen. Use my little finger.”

“Oh, sure, sorry.”

With her pregnancy, Aura’s hands were markedly thicker. The ring, which should have fit her ring finger perfectly, would not go on.

It was rather undignified, but as Zenjirou leaned forward to put it on her little finger instead, his wife murmured into his ear, “Do you have nothing to say? I was ever so hopeful that I would once more hear the words from that night.”

His movements stopped completely. “That night” was the first they had spent together. After their wedding and the expected duties had been satisfied, he had given her the ring, along with the vows that would usually be stated in answer to a priest’s prompting.

“Zenjirou?”

“Ah, uhm... I... those are words you only use once...”

Aura snorted softly at his embarrassment and sent an exaggeratedly sorrowful gaze his way. “How unfortunate. Despite this second opportunity, I shall never hear them again?”

“Agh, fine, I get it!”

She had clenched her left hand, and he would not be able to place the ring on her finger that way, so he knew he would have to compromise.

“Hahh... phew...” he heaved, pushing out the embarrassment as he spoke in the most serious voice he could manage. “I take thee to be my wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part, and with this ring, I do wed thee.”

Still silent, Aura's expression became a wide grin as she unclenched her left hand. The thick golden ring with three diamonds set into it slid onto her little finger.



A sign of love, and a symbol of a vow. Aura could feel the warmth of her husband from the cold sensation of the gold against her skin. She looked down at it for a while before smiling lovingly and facing him as he knelt, speaking quietly. "Zenjirou, stand up."

"Huh?"

"Stand up."

"S-Sure."

He had been kneeling in front of the sofa and looking up at her, and despite his confusion, quickly stood up before her. Now, she was looking up at him. Still seated, she softly took his hand and repeated the words of the vow.

"I take thee to be my husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part, and with this ring, I do wed thee."

So saying, she slid the second ring onto his ring finger, their jewelry now a perfect match.

"Aura..." he breathed in surprise, looking down at her in shock.

When she had first received the ring, Aura had not done that part. He had assumed she'd been overcome by surprise in light of the strange custom and simply couldn't keep up at the time, but that was not the case. It wasn't that she *couldn't*, but that she *wouldn't*. She had known that it was a formality, but as queen, she could not allow herself to vow to any man "till death did them part."

She had been prepared to deal with him in good faith and even to love him. She had intended to grant whatever wishes of his she could. However, the country had to come first, no matter what, and then the royal family, nothing more. If his existence ever proved detrimental to the country, she would cast him aside. That was the basis of her marriage to him at the start.

But now...

I cannot deny my feelings. As long as Zenjirou remains the man he is now, I shall never be able to cast him aside, she realized.

Of course, if Zenjirou lost himself in his status and power, and his personality changed dramatically, that would be another matter. But as long as that did not happen, she was sure that she wouldn't be able to hand down a cool, formal decree on the matter.

Having placed the ring on his finger, she gently raised both her hands. Understanding her goal, he leaned over his wife, moving carefully downward. Their lips met quietly in Zenjirou's second—and Aura's first—"kiss to seal their vow."

The kiss went on for perhaps slightly too long to be called only that, however.

Epilogue — The Royal Birth

Time passed. The gloomy yet relatively cool rainy season ended, and the western regions of the Southern Continent entered the harshest period of the year. If one tried to force a comparison to the Japanese seasons, it would be considered the three months of “summer.” The last of these months had temperatures that commonly rose over forty degrees in the daytime and wouldn’t drop below thirty-five even at night.

It was the second time that Zenjirou was experiencing the rigors of the climate. It meant that it had been one whole year since he had first arrived, but he couldn’t spare a thought to appreciate that fact just yet.

At the moment, the shutters were firmly closed to block out as much of the cruel sunlight and oppressive heat as possible. Zenjirou had been sweating and roving around in his loungewear like a bear about to hibernate.

“Sir Zenjirou, for your sweat...” A black-haired maid proffered a cool towel that she had taken from the fridge.

“Ah... right, yeah,” he answered, only just noticing the state he was in once it was pointed out to him. He took the towel and vigorously wiped off his face and neck.

The lack of thanks offered was unusual for him, but the maid knew the reason for it, and her look was sympathetic, if anything.

“Sir, perhaps you should sit for a while.” Despite the suggestion being beyond her standing, the young maid still offered it freely.

“Right,” he agreed.

Just then, a loud “Guhh!” came from his wife in the next room. Zenjirou shuddered and his breath caught in his throat, then he shook his sweaty face and refused the maid’s advice.

“Nah, I should stay on my feet. I don’t think I could just sit around.”

Today was the day of their child's birth. Like most fathers, Zenjirou could do nothing but worry, and he didn't have the spare attention to notice even the extreme heat as he paced the room.

"Excuse me, I've brought the water!"

"I have the extra cloths!"

Maids carrying a steaming tub of water and clean cloths rushed past and vanished into the bedroom. Zenjirou could do little but silently watch the rush.

A cool breeze drifted in through the door between the rooms. It came from the fan, which was running at full power over a block of ice. They couldn't point it directly at Aura while she was giving birth, but they placed it in the closed room along with the ice to lower the overall temperature as much as possible. It was a common belief that you shouldn't allow a pregnant woman to become chilled, but it must have been far better for her than a room of over forty degrees. Regardless of the impressive stamina the queen possessed, the effort of birth for several hours in the heat would doubtlessly exhaust her.

Besides, even at full blast, the fan didn't cool the room all that much, only dropping the temperature to around thirty at best. It indicated just how hot the living room was for such a temperature to feel cool in comparison.

"Damn, I really screwed up. I need to figure out how to get the air conditioner set up before next time somehow," Zenjirou muttered to himself quietly enough that no one else could hear him as he wandered around.

The room was nearly sixty square meters and the windows were far less airtight than a modern building, so the hefty machine might not cool the area as much as he liked, but it would still probably make a significant difference.

"Actually, it'd probably be better to learn teleportation magic first, then I could bring a member of the Gilbelle family here."

His daily practice meant that he had finally succeeded with several simple spells, but it would be quite some time before he could freely use teleportation magic like Aura could. Either way, the air conditioner and the need to learn teleportation magic were matters for the future. There was nothing he could do *now*.

Aura had told him to use a healing jewel if she or the baby’s lives were in danger, but the one duty he’d been given was one he never wanted to have to carry out.

He heaved another breath, having lost track of how many times he had sighed that day.

“Sir, have some water,” a maid suggested, worried about how much he’d been sweating. She took some water from the fridge and poured it into a cup.

“Thanks,” he replied, quaffing the drink and feeling the sweat start to roll down his body again.

He used the towel he’d been given earlier to wipe his face and neck. He had calmed down slightly now and suddenly seemed to remember his manners as he finally spoke directly to the maids.

“All of you should take care too. I don’t mind if you use the towels and water from the fridge.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“We appreciate your concern.”

It was the first time he had shown them consideration that day, and the maids smiled widely at it, but Zenjirou was too anxious enough to notice.

He resumed his nervous walk around the room.

He stopped, looking at the door to the bedroom.

He scratched his head unconsciously.

He sighed.

Then he started walking again. The calm the drink had brought him had vanished almost at once.

“Argh, damn. How long, how much longer...”

In the end, his mood swings would last until the loud “first cry” came from the other room.



Queen Aura had safely given birth to her first child.

Once Doctor Michel gave his permission, Zenjirou entered the bedroom to find his beloved wife lying down with a smile on her haggard face. She wasn't on the large bed that had originally been in their room, but rather the separate, smaller bed that Zenjirou had arranged for himself after her pregnancy. The bigger bed would have been too bulky for the doctor and maids to work around, so they had chosen this one for the birth.

"Aura!" he called, rushing to her side.

"Oh, Zenjirou?" she murmured, lifting her head slightly and smiling at him. Her tanned skin and red hair were drenched with sweat, completely at odds with her usual lively appearance.

"You don't need to get up for me," he insisted from his place by her pillow, noting how tired she looked. Regardless, there was satisfaction on her face.

"I know. It is fine, though. Look, the child and I are safe."

He followed Aura's gaze to where a maid was standing on the other side of the bed. The stocky middle-aged woman was holding a baby swaddled in a fine red cloth to her chest.

"That's..."

"Yes. My... *our* child."

"Our child..."

Zenjirou cautiously studied the baby's features. An affable smile was on the familiar rounded face of the woman holding him as she turned the baby slightly to give the new father a better view.

"Take a look, Sir Zenjirou. You have a healthy baby boy."

"A boy, huh?"

He walked around the bed and approached the maid and child, once more looking at the infant in her arms.

"I think he may have my eyes," Aura commented.

"Indeed, but his mouth is most certainly Sir Zenjirou's," the maid answered.

“His skin tone looks to be between the two of ours. He is a little pale for a Capuan child.”

Aura and the maid were enthusiastically discussing the boy’s features, but Zenjirou couldn’t honestly agree. Could this ape-like creature, hairless and with his eyes closed, really be said to look like anyone? His skin color was the usual bright red of a newborn and didn’t currently seem to share either parent’s coloring.

Beyond all of that, Zenjirou’s eyes weren’t focused on the baby’s features, but on something else entirely.

Whoa, he’s got even more mana than Aura. Maybe even twice what I have?

His time studying with Octavia meant that he could judge the amount of mana someone had by sight. It was one of the most fundamental skills in this world, but he had learned enough to see that his son had an overwhelming amount of mana.

The mana that a person possessed was determined at birth, so it wasn’t strange for a newborn to have more than a royal. However, seeing this limp figure that could be a monkey as easily as a human glowing with so much magical power was certainly disconcerting.

Carefully, Zenjirou reached a hand out to the baby in the maid’s arms. When his index finger touched the soft, flushed skin, the child tightly gripped his finger.

“Wah?! He grabbed me!”

Was he feeling so emotional over the sensation of a small hand grabbing him because its owner was his own flesh and blood?

“Wow, he’s so small but he still has five fingers...”

“A good thing too. People don’t grow more fingers as they age, after all,” the maid answered with a laugh, making sure to support the baby’s neck.

Aura smiled from her place of repose in response to her husband’s almost childlike reaction to the first sight of his child.

“Cute, is he not?” she chuckled.

“Yeah, he is... the cutest,” he nodded repeatedly, completely forgetting his rude descriptions of “monkey-like” from a moment before as his tiny son held his finger.

“Ahhh, dahhh, ahhh!”

“Oh, my... there, there,” the maid said soothingly, immediately rocking the baby.

Now that Zenjirou had regained possession of his finger, Doctor Michel took the opportunity to address him.

“Sir Zenjirou, first allow me to offer my congratulations. As you can see, both Her Majesty and the prince are hale and hearty.”

The words reminded Zenjirou that he had yet to thank the doctor for protecting his precious wife and son. He hurriedly swung around to face him.

“Right, thank you, Doctor Michel. It is entirely thanks to you that that’s the case. I cannot thank you enough!”

Zenjirou completely forgot his station and practically groveled. The doctor’s eyes widened in surprise, but he seemed to decide against questioning it.

“Not at all. I am unworthy of such praise,” he answered with his usual calm smile, turning back to the queen. “Regardless, Your Majesty, you are exhausted from the birth and I cannot condone you leaving your bed today. Should you need to relieve yourself, make sure that at least two maids are here to aid you.”

“Very well,” she replied.

While the queen and the doctor discussed her condition further, Zenjirou timidly turned to the maid. “Uh-Uhmm, I’d like to hold him too... can I?”

Her eyes widened in surprise at the newly-minted father’s words before a grin made its way onto her face, and she nodded deeply. “Of course. Please be careful, though. He can’t support his own neck yet, so make sure that you do so for him.”

“Right, got it. Whoa, like this?” he asked, taking his child into his arms with careful movements. “Whoa...”

The small, helpless, and soft sensation in his arms made it seem like a miracle

he was unharmed, the vivid feeling of *life* traveling through his hands.

“Haha, how wonderful, Papa is already holding you,” Aura smiled from the bed as she watched her husband’s clumsy efforts. Her face had been cleaned of sweat as she lifted it and looked to the maids at her side. “I wish to sit up. Assist me.”

“Okay. Ah, Doctor Michel?” the young maid asked, seeking the physician’s permission. The older doctor thought for a moment before nodding.

“Very well; I can permit a short period of sitting up on the bed.”

With permission having been granted, the maids moved to carry out the queen’s order.

“Excuse us, Your Majesty.”

“We will put our hands behind your back; lean on us, please.”

“One moment; I will put a cushion behind you, so lean back on the headboard.”

As the three maids’ skilled movements helped to lift Aura up, another placed a pillow behind her.

“Phew...” she sighed deeply, leaning into the new cushioning after her servants had arranged her almost like a doll. Sweat beaded her face and neck, sliding across her collarbone and down between her breasts.

“Your Majesty, I can wipe off your body.”

“Yes, please do.”

Aura closed her eyes like a cat having its neck stroked and thanked the maids as they wiped her all over with cool towels. Her body was flushed with both the heat of the room and the effort of childbirth, so the cool, wrung towels were probably exceedingly pleasant, Zenjirou thought as he left them to it.

The prince consort, his son still held carefully in his arms as he took great care to avoid the slightest chance of an accident, seated himself in a chair next to the bed.

“It’s over, then,” he said suddenly.

Aura looked at him, now sweat-free, and nodded. "For now, at least."

The queen, having just given birth, and her husband, still holding the newborn, talked for a time. The doctor and maids, in keeping with the mood, remained silent, almost as if they had planned it, moving quietly off to the walls to avoid getting in the way of the three.

Although she was aware of their consideration, the queen continued to speak, her words only intended for her new family.

"This was originally nothing more than a royal duty, yet seeing my child with my own eyes, holding him with my own hands... all those assumptions crumble away," she murmured, her eyes fixed on the tiny bundle in her husband's arms.

Zenjirou too looked down at his child, an irrepressible smile upon his face as he agreed. The queen and her spouse shared the moment, not looking at each other, just at their son.

"He's real cute."

"I agree; hopelessly so. I understand why royal children must be raised by a wet nurse and with foster siblings." If she had to raise him herself, Aura knew that she would spoil him rotten and neglect his royal training.

Zenjirou exchanged a glance with her at the admission and burst into laughter. "Definitely. I couldn't tell you whether I could give him tough love, that's for sure." He had never imagined that he would adore his child so much.

"So, what name will you give him?" Aura asked.

"Huh, you're not naming him? I don't know much about this country's names," he answered, taken aback by the sudden question.

"I will too, of course, but the custom is that a child whose parents originated from two different countries has names from both. Of course, when considering the inheritance of lineal magic, it is a rarity for a royal to receive two names."

Zenjirou nodded in understanding. "Right, I get it. I'll need to think of one, then."

If he'd known about the custom, he would have downloaded a list of baby names before leaving his old world. He regretted the oversight a bit, but it

didn't matter much. He'd just have to come up with a fitting one himself.

Seeing his enthusiasm, Aura chuckled atop her mountain of pillows. "Ahaha, indeed. We shall both need to rack our brains for good names."

Perhaps because of the laughter, the end of the sentence was slightly hoarse as her breath came harshly. Hearing it, Zenjirou looked worriedly at his beloved wife.

"Yeah, we will. You should lie back down, though. Doctor Michel said you shouldn't be too hard on your body just now."

The doctor nodded from the sidelines at Zenjirou's words. Their position as servants meant that they couldn't say anything, but the maids were looking at her with concern as well.

Aura gave a tight smile and a shrug before speaking. "Very well. I understand. Can I remain like this for just a little longer, though? I wish to watch my son for a short while more. So that I may see him in my dreams as well..."

"Jeez... fine, just a little longer," Zenjirou acquiesced, understanding the feeling more than anyone.

"Indeed, just a while longer," she said grandly.

The queen, however, could hardly keep such a promise and continued to watch her child and his father from the bed until the doctor firmly intervened on medical grounds.

To be continued in *The Ideal Sponger Life 3*.

Appendix — The Lord and Maids' Joint Development

Vanessa was a maid who worked in the inner palace in the Kingdom of Capua. Despite the term “maid,” she didn’t have the refined features and loveliness that you might normally associate with a royal maid. She was a stout, middle-aged woman with a rounded waist and hips.

It went without saying, but an isolated environment like the inner palace could not be run by fair maidens alone. There were a number of older maids in charge of various areas of service, starting with the head maid, Amanda. The staff could be split into two groups: a large number of younger women chosen for their looks, who made up the bulk of the workforce, and a smaller number of experienced older women to lead them.

Vanessa was part of the latter group. “Head of cooking for the inner palace” was her formal position. Of course, despite the title, she was not technically a royal chef.

The official royal chefs were men who worked in the main palace, and they cooked most of the meals for Aura and Zenjirou, which were then brought to the inner palace by the maids. Of course, it was rather inefficient for them to cook every single dish throughout the day, to be subsequently delivered to the royal couple. Therefore, while the chefs prepared the staples and main meals that required particular culinary skill, Vanessa and the others managed the simpler foodstuffs within the inner palace.

The inner palace kitchen was small but equipped as well as the main kitchens, and Vanessa’s skills were not too inferior to those of the royal chefs. The patriarchy inherent to Capuan society pervaded even the culinary sphere, however, and there was no possibility of a woman joining their ranks. So Vanessa worked daily as an inner palace counterpart to the royal head chef.

“Listen up, girls, it’s time to make your beloved snacks. Give it your all!” she called, her hands on her wide hips.

“Right!” the three younger women cried energetically in return.

The heads of each department had set positions, but the general staff rotated through the various areas of service on a schedule. This was born of both the desire to give them a thorough grounding in all skills that they would need as maids, and also to ensure they could lend aid from one area to another when one specialty needed extra staff without warning. In fact, the monthly deep cleaning of the bath and the general maintenance of the gardens after the rainy season were both managed by their entire workforce.

Vanessa's face broke into a wide smile at their prompt response as she clapped her hands. "Right, then, let's get going!"

Her speech and behavior were a little idiosyncratic when compared to a typical "maid of the inner palace." Put bluntly, she lacked refinement. Naturally, she conducted herself impeccably around Zenjirou and Aura, far beyond what one would expect from her bulky frame, but when there wasn't anyone providing oversight, she acted more like a woman in a bar downtown. So much so that even some of the younger maids from well-to-do families struggled to interact with her.

But that was far from a concern for the three maids in the kitchen today. The ones currently on kitchen duty were Faye, Dolores, and Letti.

Vanessa's voice rang out with instructions. "Faye, you handle the range. Add wood and keep it burning at the right temperature!"

"Sure!"

"Dolores, sift some flour onto the table!"

"Got it."

"Letti, you're beating the eggs with me. I'll do the yolks, you do the whites."

"Ahh, that's the hardest one."

They followed Vanessa's commands and separated to perform their duties. There were many ingredients set out on the table: sifted flour, egg yolks whisked to a frothy mix, and meringue (egg whites beaten until stiff peaks formed). Along with that, there was powdered bicarb, refined vegetable oil, and dark sugar.

Some might have been able to guess what they were going to make just from seeing the ingredients. They were baking something called a sponge cake. Of course, sponge cakes didn't originally exist in Capua, and it went without saying that the idea had come from Zenjirou. Before relocating to this world, he had downloaded every recipe he could get his hands on for confectioneries and snacks to go along with alcohol.

Understandably, close to eighty percent of what he'd brought was impossible to replicate here. The reason for that was exceptionally simple: the majority of western baked goods and sweets on Earth used dairy products like milk and butter. The livestock in Capua, however, consisted primarily of drakes (large reptiles), so there were no animals to milk.

Apparently, there were goats and cows on the Northern Continent, so such things could technically be acquired and imported for vast sums, but Zenjirou wasn't comfortable with the thought of using so much money on his own luxuries. After all, the kingdom had thus far spent hundreds of years without tasting dairy products. If they produced butter and cheese, there would doubtless be an initial resistance to such products. In fact, when Zenjirou had brought it up with Aura, she had had a somewhat sour expression on her face as she asked, "People put animal milk in their *mouths*?"

As a result, the only Earth foods they could reproduce were those that didn't use dairy. One was the sponge cake they were making right now. Of course, there were versions like milk or butter sponges that did indeed use dairy products, but the recipe Zenjirou had brought was, fortunately, dairy-free. Eggs, strong flour, sugar, granulated sugar, and salad oil; these were the only items required.

Still, the sponge cake they were making wouldn't follow his recipe precisely. They had no oils that were refined enough to match salad oil, so they substituted the most inoffensive vegetable oil they could find. It still had a fairly strong flavor, though, so they added a splash of the brandy that he had brought to mask it.

On top of that, the only rising agent in the recipe was the meringue, but it hadn't worked quite right so far, so they decided to use natural sodium bicarbonate (powdered natron) as an additional leavening agent.

The differences in techniques and ingredients came together in the final look and taste, making it something a bit different from the original. In spite of that, it was an improved recipe that Vanessa had developed by way of trial and error, using those skills of hers that were equal to the royal chefs'. The light scent of brandy and alcohol content might even mean that some people would have preferred it to the original sponge cake.

Humming, Vanessa whipped the whisk through the mix in a big copper bowl under her left arm, stirring together a large number of egg yolks. The practice of beating eggs was a standard culinary technique there already, so she was well used to the process.

While doing that, she was also using the resistance of the mixture to judge whether it was done, and simultaneously keeping an eye on the younger women to direct them.

"Right, nearly time to mix in the meringue. Letti, how's it going?" she asked the girl at her side as she added the sugar with practiced movements.

The maid in question's eyes were droopy, and her face was flushed as she whisked the egg whites. "Right, nearly therrre," she answered, her voice having grown exhausted even in the short time since they'd started.

Unlike the egg yolks, which only needed gentle whisking to froth them up, meringues took a lot of effort to beat until the peaks started to form. It was tiring enough that her roommates exchanged sympathetic looks from their own stations.

Faye was in front of the range, sweating buckets, and Dolores had sifted masses of flour, getting some on her face. Regardless, Letti continued to beat the whites, making her entire body shake as she worked away.

"Good, good. Once you're done, bring it here. Faye! How's the range?"

"All good; ready when you are!" the slight girl cheered, raising a tiny fist, her apron and face smudged with ash.

"Great, let's really get started, then. Dolores, you're done with the flour, right? Excellent, now grease the tins and pick something to go on the bottom."

"Really? I get to choose?" asked the aforementioned maid, her usually sleepy

eyes crinkling with excitement.

The original recipe called for granulated sugar, but Vanessa had tried several alternatives so far: chopped nuts, slices of dried fruits, and so on. This was, when it came down to it, the part that had the greatest impact on the final flavor, so it was unsurprising that Dolores was so happy to have the task.

“Ahh, no fair!” Letti called from her station.

“Go with the sugar, Dolores! Sugar’s the tastiest!” added Faye.

Once they’d given the best of the snacks to Zenjirou and Aura, the maids working in the kitchen were free to “dispose of the leftovers appropriately.” Therefore, they were quite invested in the outcome.

As Vanessa added the oil to the yolk bit by bit, she scolded the three boisterous maids. “Come on, you three, keep going. Focus on your work. You need to hurry up and pick, Dolores. If a servant’s dithering delays her master’s meal, then she’s a disgrace to her profession.”

Unlike the head maid, Amanda, or the one in charge of cleaning, Ines, Vanessa rarely chastised her charges, but she had her limits when it came to cooking.

“Riiight.”

“Sorry, Miss Vanessa.”

“Sorryyyy.”

The three “problem children” answered in unison, ducking their heads at the rebuke.

Roughly one hour later, a sweet scent filled the room. The source was, it went without saying, the finished pastries.

With practiced movements, Vanessa removed the cakes from the tins and used a bread knife to cut them. Her three assistants leaned over the table from where they sat, watching with bated breath. Ignoring their ravenous gazes, like predators finally finding prey after three days of starvation, Vanessa divided the cakes into equal pieces.

“Right, so this one’s from here to here... and this one’s from here to here.”

She surveyed the cakes for the best pieces and arranged them carefully on a metal plate. The stove was a primitive wood-burning one, so even her skills couldn't avoid the heat being somewhat uneven. As a result, she baked with the assumption that there would be a certain amount of problems while they cooked, then presented only the best parts to their masters.

Letti watched her set up the cakes for Zenjirou and asked her a question in a much more serious tone than she would normally use. "Ah, Miss Vanessa, that bit is lumpy at the top... Do you not think it would be best to keep it away from Sir Zenjirou?"

The piece in question was actually the one with the most sugar on top. Prompted by their companion's suggestion, Dolores and Faye joined in, hiding their gluttony beneath an apparent concern for their master.

"Miss Vanessa, look closely, this part has some small lumps of flour on it. Working in the kitchen, I cannot condone offering this to Sir Zenjirou," Dolores noted, a mask of calm forced onto her face as she pointed at the piece with the nicest coloring.

"Miss Vanessa, Miss Vanessa! That one on the edge of the plate! It's cut slightly crookedly! I'll take responsibility and dispose of it!" Faye cried, bouncing in her seat, her eye on a piece thicker than all the rest.

Vanessa gazed silently at her staff, slaves to their greed, their eyes half-lidded. They realized they'd gone too far just a moment too late.

She blew out a gusty sigh, still saying nothing. Then, "You utter fools!"

"Agh!"

"Ow!"

"Yow?!"

The three cried out as she dropped a heavy blow onto each of their heads.



Afterward, Faye, Dolores, and Letti took the best of the cakes to the living room and left them with Zenjirou, then returned to the kitchen.

"We're back!" Faye called.

“We gave Sir Zenjirou the cakes,” Dolores added.

“He said they’re great and to tell you thanks as always,” Letti finished.

Their cheery voices and appearances showed no signs of the hit they’d each taken from Vanessa not long before. Of course, their mental resilience and ability to quickly bounce back probably had something to do with her willingness to strike them so hard in the first place, but they hadn’t noticed that.

Vanessa remained seated as she greeted the young women with a bright grin. “Great! Good work. I’m brewing some tea, so let’s take a break. Come on, each of you can have any piece you like.”

“Yahoo!”

“Thank you, they look delicious.”

“Yay! Hmm, hmm.”

The trio whooped as they reached the table and each devoted their focus to evaluating which of the cakes took their fancy. There was a lot left, but they would need to share it with the other maids or invite their resentment, so they could only take one slice each.

As the three were plating their choices, Vanessa poured the tea, placing a cup before each of the three women and then herself. The plates and cups were all wooden. Capua had no ceramics or glass, so most tableware was either made from metal or wood.

“Here, your tea. It’s still hot, so mind you don’t burn yourselves,” she told them.

“Thank you, Miss Vanessa!”

“Yay! Faye, pass me the sugar?”

“Hold on, Letti. If you put that much in your tea, you won’t be able to taste the cake,” Dolores protested.

“Dolores, don’t waste your breath, Letti heaps sugar onto everything.”

Letti giggled in response as the tea party continued with the girls in high

spirits.

You could potentially deem their utter lack of shame as they enjoyed the tea and cake in front of their boss, proof of the maids' courage. Amanda, the head maid, put a great deal of importance on discipline and seniority. She would certainly have called the sight unacceptable, but Vanessa was the most easygoing among the senior staff. In fact, she preferred the joyous atmosphere.

"So, Dolores, is the paper you've got the usual?" she asked. Vanessa had finished her own piece of cake and was now cleansing the sweetness on her palette with the tea.

The target of her question, the tall maid, was nibbling away at her cake, making it last. "Ah, yeah. It's the next recipe from Sir Zenjirou," she answered, quickly swallowing her current bite.

Every so often, the prince consort would translate another recipe from his homeworld and hand it off to the kitchen staff. Of course, he had Aura check it first to make sure that there weren't any mistakes that might confuse the meaning of the text.

"Ehehe, I wonder what this one is. I can't wait," Letti—the one most interested in the otherworldly sweets—mused, her eyes widening as she focused on the new recipe.

Naturally, Faye and Dolores both enjoyed replicating the recipes as well, if not to the same extent as their coworker.

"We're counting on you, Letti."

"Come on, Faye, don't just push it off on her. Letti might be the best at cooking, but that doesn't mean we can leave it all to her. We've got to put in our own effort too!" Dolores scolded her, jabbing an elbow into her short coworker's side in response to Faye's blatant scheme to ride Letti's coattails.

"Ow! Quit it, Dolores. You might be thin, but that just makes your elbows pointier."

"Shut it; you can hardly talk, midget."

"Who are you calling a midget, long legs?!"

“Come on, you two, don’t be rude. We’re finally enjoying these delicious snacks, so let’s be quiet and savor them,” Letti rebuked the pair as they fell into one of their common bouts of ribbing. The look on her face was somewhere between unhappiness and anger. She knew better than anyone that the two weren’t really fighting, but they were interfering with her beloved snacks, and that just wouldn’t do.

“Yes, do keep it under control; even my patience has its limits,” Vanessa warned them with a hint of reluctant amusement. “That aside, when are you three planning on trying out the new dessert?”

The maids didn’t have much time to spare on attempting new recipes during their usual workday. Serving the three meals and making afternoon snacks was normally the limit of what they could manage.

“Well...” Letti murmured.

“Obviously,” Faye started, her argument with Dolores stopping instantly as the girl in question completed her thought.

“In three days. I seem to remember that Sir Zenjirou and Her Majesty will be working during lunch and have an evening banquet planned, so they will only be taking breakfast here.”

The two spoke like they were reading from a memo. Of course, working in the inner palace, they routinely memorized their master’s engagements as a matter of course.

Vanessa nodded with a smile, the young maid’s answer being satisfactory, but the smile seemed to bode poorly for them. “That’s certainly true. But the head chef requested my help for that banquet. Apparently, Sir Zenjirou said that I know his tastes best.” Her rueful laugh suggested that it was an honor as the chuckle rocked her stout form.

To the three problem maids, however, this was no laughing matter.

“What?!” Faye yelled in surprise.

“You won’t be here?” Dolores asked, her face worried and questioning.

“What? So... we won’t be able... to make the new snacks?” Letti stammered,

her face screwing up in sorrow, looking close to tears.

The answer was, “most likely not.” Letti might have been the best of the three when it came to cooking, but she was still just “a maid skilled at cooking” when it came down to it.

Vanessa, on the other hand, was “a chef in maid’s clothing,” and far beyond her level. So naturally, their efforts to reproduce Zenjirou’s requested recipes had thus far been led by her.

“But... then how about in seven days? There’s no banquet, but both of them will be away from the inner palace that day. It’s less time than we’d have three days from now, but that should...” Dolores quickly flipped through her mental schedule for an alternative plan, but Vanessa interrupted her with an oddly fixed expression on her face.

“Well, if you’re all right with that, I don’t mind. Can I get you to pass it on to Carina?”

Carina was the name of one of their colleagues, another young woman they worked with. The three of them parsed her wording at the same time.

“Ah?!”

“Right, that won’t work; we need to do it before then.”

“We change jobs in five days!”

The three of them cried out in turn, all feeling the looming threat of that five-day deadline as they racked their brains. If they gave it a go in three days’ time, it would be theirs for the taking, but in seven, it would be the next group’s responsibility.

Vanessa gave a theatrical shrug as she watched them, shaking her head exaggeratedly. “What a shame. I was going to allow the first team who perfected the next recipe to have part of the fridge as a reward, you know.”

The huge, five-compartment fridge in the living room was Zenjirou’s, of course, but he’d given permission for Vanessa to use a third of it as she wished, starting with the crisper, since she was in charge of cooking.

The trio perked up at that news. Capua was still in its hottest season, and

while Zenjirou allowed the maids a certain amount of leeway with using the chilled towels, cold water, and even the ice from the ice maker, there were dozens of maids in the inner palace. Towels aside, there wasn't enough chilled water or ice for everyone to take what they pleased.

With that in mind, the thought of having their own section of the fridge, albeit a limited amount of space, was immensely attractive.

Faye, Dolores, and Letti exchanged glances, checking that they were all on the same page before they spoke together.

“Miss Vanessa!”

“Leave it to us!”

“We'll try to perfect it on our own in three days!”



Three days later, in the afternoon, Faye, Dolores, and Letti gathered in the quiet inner palace's kitchen. No one else was around.

The three were of course wearing long aprons over their uniforms, ready to bake. Faye had short hair, and it was in her usual style, but Dolores and Letti both had long hair tied up in a bun to stop the strands from falling down and getting in the way of their work.

They'd decided that they would try to complete the recipe on their own, which had probably been Vanessa's hope.

“Got it. Good luck, then. I'll make sure you've got plenty of ingredients, and you can do what you like with them,” their supervisor had announced, a smile saying “all according to plan” on her face.

While the three of them didn't realize it at the time, trying to replicate the recipe on their own was good culinary practice. If it managed to improve their skills, it was cause for celebration for Vanessa, who was entrusted with their training.

“All right, let's get started!” Letti proclaimed, clapping her hands in front of her prominent chest.

“Roger that, ma'am! You're the boss today, Letti. Faye and I will follow your

instructions, so lead us well.”

“That’s right, boss!”

Letti rolled up her sleeves as her roommates answered, then folded her arms and replied in turn. “Yeah, I’ll try. Have you two memorized the recipe?”

“Of course; I’ve read it more times than I care to count,” Dolores assured her, waving a piece of paper that was much scruffier and more crumpled than it had been three days ago.

“I-I-I’ll be fine too?” Faye stuttered. While the end of her sentence seemed to raise the tone of her voice in question, Letti couldn’t address her worries just then.

“Jeez, Faye,” she said with a rare pout, “I’m trusting you here. Anyway, let’s get started on the puff pastry.”

She started them off, reaching out for the array of ingredients atop the table. The name of the food made it clear that the new snack was a pastry of some kind. Of course, it was not a “proper” pastry. Actual puff pastries required you to fold butter between layers of dough, which was impossible in a country without dairy products. Zenjirou, however, had translated a recipe for a “low-calorie pastry” that used vegetable oil rather than butter. The recipe was part of the current trend towards diet sweets, but it was much appreciated now that he had no access to dairy.

With noises of exertion, Letti started following the recipe, adding a small amount of salt into some flour and kneading it together with water. They were working under the assumption that they wouldn’t get it right the first time, so each of them was making their own pastry for practice.

Kneading the dough was something that the three had grown used to while making other snacks and bread, so they all began with fairly practiced movements. But watching them, one could see that Letti’s skills were clearly superior.

“Ah, Faye, you might have kneaded it too much, maybe? It says to do it until the dough’s crumbly, right?” Letti pointed out.

“What? No way! Mine’s already all tough.”

“Silly, that’s what you get for not reading the recipe properly.”

Managing to keep an eye on her coworkers while tackling her own task was a clear sign of Letti’s more advanced skill level.

“Hmm, this should work,” she mused. “How are you guys doing? Once you’re done with this step, you need to cover the surface with oil, fold it over, roll it out flat, then coat the surface in oil again. You’ll need to do it three times total.”

“Got it!”

“Man, this is tough. Knowing me, I’d better be ready to end up covered in this stuff,” Dolores sighed, wiping the sweat on her forehead with a cloth. A fire was already burning in the oven so that they wouldn’t waste time, and the kitchen was rather hot.

“We need something to catch the sweat.”

“Yeah, otherwise we’re in trouble.”

“Our snacks will end up all salty.”

The three cheerfully tied cloths over their heads to absorb the perspiration and returned to their baking with renewed vigor.

A while later, there were three sets of pastries on the table.

“Great, we’re done. Now we just need to decide what to put in them. I’m going to go with candied apricots, I think,” Letti said with a tired smile, strands of hair that had escaped from her bun plastered to her face.

“Hmm, I think I’ll just go for bananas...” Dolores suggested thoughtfully.

“I’ll... Hmm, nothing works, does it? Right? I’ll just cover the inside with sugar dissolved in the oil and bake it like that.”

The three of them continued to muse over what fillings to use for a while longer. As young women who liked sweets and were currently working without any supervision, they enjoyed chattering boisterously as they worked.

“Hooray, done!” Letti cried, raising her hands in triumph.

“How long do we cook them for, though? We usually let Vanessa deal with that,” Faye commented.

The oven had no thermostatic control and worked by burning wood, so cooking on intuition alone required no small measure of skill. Letti might have been the one with the most experience in cooking, but this was too much for her.

Dolores, however, chuckled, a fierce smile on her face as she dispelled Faye's doubts. "I thought of that. Look, I borrowed this from Sir Zenjirou yesterday!"

She pulled a folded-up game console from her pocket. Her recent gaming spree during their breaks meant that she moved with surety as she opened it and tapped away at the controls.

"If you do this... right, there we go, a clock!"

Playing video games had allowed them to master Arabic numerals, and they even understood Earth's time system of sixty seconds, sixty minutes, and twenty-four hours (they'd learned it while running through time trials in a kart racing game).

"The recipe says to bake it at two hundred degrees for forty minutes, right? Now we can tell exactly how long it's been," she boasted, puffing out her tiny chest and garnering applause from a grinning Letti.

"Hey, that's great, Dolores! We're all set to track the time, then. But what about temperature? Even if we can tell the time accurately, if we screw up the heat in the oven, it'll all be for naught, won't it? How hot's two hundred degrees?"

"Ugh..." Dolores flinched.

Faye immediately jumped in. "Thought of that indeed! Well, I expected as much."

"I-It's fine! We can at least get the timing right; that'll be really helpful!" Dolores insisted, her face reddening at the teasing. Regardless, it was a fair point. Even with the uncertainty of the temperature, they couldn't overlook the advantages of knowing the cooking times.

Furthermore, if they had a clock, they could do better with successive attempts much more easily. If the pastries hadn't baked enough after the first forty minutes; they could easily bake the next one for forty-five. It would be far

simpler to judge such adjustments compared to relying on their own sense of time and cooking it “a bit longer this time.” It was easy to recognize just how much more difficult the lack of a timer would make it.

“Come on, you two, don’t fight; let’s get them in.” Letti’s soft cheeks puffed up in an angry look that wouldn’t scare anyone.

Forty minutes later found three pseudo pastries cooling atop the table. They were most certainly “pseudo pastries,” as they could never be mistaken for actual pastries. Calling these things, which were covered in black and burned to a crisp, “pastries” would be blasphemy to every patisserie in history.

Dolores sighed as Faye murmured about the charred coloring. Sparing the cakes a sidelong glance, Letti wore her usual soft expression as she took a knife and cut into hers. She separated the hot pastry, and steam rose from it as she used the knife to scrape the scorched sections off, somehow managing to salvage the edible parts and plating them.

“Now we need to taste them,” she instructed.

“Ugh... R-Right.”

“It takes quite a bit of courage to eat something that looks like that.”

The three of them reached out towards the unappetizing pseudo pastries, mostly out of obligation. The sour looks on their faces made it clear that it was not an enjoyable experience as they sampled the results.

“Dolores, I can’t taste any sweetness from the banana in yours at all. It’s really hard to eat it,” Faye said first.

“Sorry! This one from Letti with the apricot jam is way too sweet. And you added even *more* sugar.”

“Faye, yours is too hard. It’s not just tough to bite through; I can barely break it by hand.”

Each of them mercilessly judged each other’s efforts. They didn’t assess their own cakes as a rule; after all, it would be far from an objective judgment.

“All right,” Letti cheered once they’d finished the obligatory tasting, not even waiting for the food to settle, “let’s learn from this and try again!”

“On it! We’ve still got loads of ingredients here!”

“I hope the next batch is more appetizing,” Dolores muttered as she and Faye were pulled from their chairs in Letti’s wake.

Make, bake, taste, repeat—that was what made up the rest of their day until the sun went down. The three problem maids only stopped once it finally grew dark.



The next afternoon, Faye, Dolores, and Letti stood in front of Vanessa as she smiled with her hands on her hips, their nervousness apparent. They had just finished taking Zenjirou his lunch and had a little free time.

“Okay,” Vanessa said, “let’s see what you managed yesterday.”

“Right!” the three of them replied energetically, bursting into motion to demonstrate the fruits of their labors.

As Faye adjusted the oven’s temperature, Letti began to knead the dough. At the same time, Dolores put the game console where they could see the clock and began mixing high-quality sugar and cinnamon to sprinkle over the dough.

The filling... was nothing.

The whole day before had seen absolutely no success in trying to fill the pastry like one would do with an apple or pumpkin pie. It might have been too thin, as the liquid from the filling kept making its way through the base. They’d tried thickening it to prevent the soggiess, but that had led to it being too hard to eat. And each time they had changed ingredients, it had taken a different amount of time to cook, causing them even more grief.

Letti had finally settled on what they were making now: long rectangles that were about two fingers thick, with nothing inside. Once the dough was crumbly, they’d cut it up into rectangles, coat them in oil, sprinkle more oil and cinnamon on top, and then bake them.

Unlike yesterday, Zenjirou was taking all of his meals in the inner palace, so they didn’t have as much time. They only had this one chance.

“Right, the dough’s done, Faye.”

“All good here too; ready when you are!”

“Okay, Letti, put them in and I’ll keep an eye on the time.”

Vanessa watched the maids doing their best to create the desserts with a soft smile on her face, like one might wear when observing small children.

“Starting now!” Letti exclaimed.

“Got it; we’ll take them out forty minutes from now! Faye,” Dolores prompted.

“Yep, I’ll keep the temperature right where it is.”

Some time later, a sweet smell rose from the oven. Vanessa maintained a nonchalant expression as she reached out for the pastries, the three young maids watching her face anxiously.

“Hmm, it’s rather different from what the recipe said,” she remarked.

“Th-That’s because—” Dolores began reflexively, only to be silenced by a look from Vanessa.

“However,” their superior continued, “they’re good enough from the look and scent. All that remains is to taste them.”

She opened her mouth and bit into one of the rectangles.

“M... mph...”

The only sound audible in the kitchen was the crunching as she chewed. Once she had finished the first piece, she spoke.

“Yeah, not bad. Good job, Letti; just what I’d expect from you.”

“Th-Thank you very much!”

Joyous expressions made their way onto the younger women’s faces, but Vanessa rained on their parade, continuing, “There’s still room for improvement, though. For example, the pastry will be flakier and nicer to eat if you score it before cooking. It could be fun to cut them into three thinner sections and braid them together as well. Also, if you’re going to oil them and coat them in sugar, try oiling and frying them, *then* add the cinnamon and sugar. It might taste better. We can’t serve them like this, at least.”

“Right...” Letti answered, all three of them slumping.

It wasn't good enough. Their best effort wouldn't be rewarded... but that was part of the job.

“Still, you did well. I think Carina's group and I will be able to finish it off.”

“What?!” Faye yelled angrily. “But what about—”

“Quit it!” Dolores hissed, pulling at her, but Faye's expression didn't change. Having their hard work taken over by their successors, with the final reward going to another group was an unbearable thought.

Vanessa gave a reluctant smile as the small maid looked up at her sulkily, far from how she should be treating her superior. “I know,” she said soothingly. “If I just let Carina's group have the fridge then it wouldn't be fair to you.”

She put her wide hand on Faye's head and patted her in a motherly way.

“Does that mean...” Faye cried, her sadness vanishing in a heartbeat as she suddenly became all smiles.

“You still didn't perfect it like we agreed, though, so... I know, we'll call it half-successful. The other half will be up to Carina and the others. So, once they manage to get it to the point where we can serve it, I'll let all six of you use part of the fridge for a month. How does that sound?”

“That's great!”

“Yeah!”

“Yes!”

The three girls answered in an enthusiastic chorus.

Vanessa smiled just as brightly as she clapped her hands. “Okay, then; we're done for now. I'll look in on Sir Zenjirou and ask if he has any requests for today's snacks. While I do that, you three can clean up and get the kitchen ready for the next project.”

“Got it.”

“Very well.”

“Understood.”

Vanessa gave them a final smile as she said, “I’m counting on you,” before leaving.

The three women did as they were told, cleaning the surfaces and utensils they’d dirtied during their baking and putting them away as they chattered happily.

“Hey, why don’t we go tell Carina how to cook them once we’re done?” Faye suggested as she swept the flour off the counter with a small brush.

Washing out a bowl, Dolores pondered her roommate’s suggestion before nodding. “Yeah, that might be best. I’ll teach them how to tell the time on that machine. They’ll need to learn how to judge it by feel eventually, but it’s tough starting out with no clock.”

“Right, the longer they take, the longer it’ll be before we can use the fridge. I’m all for it!” Letti agreed from where she was sweeping up the flour from the floor.

Now the other group’s success was linked to their own. If they could gain the use of the fridge just a little bit earlier, they had no qualms about cooperating.

“Let’s get this done as quick as we can and go see them!”

“Let’s. They’re handling the baths at the moment, right?”

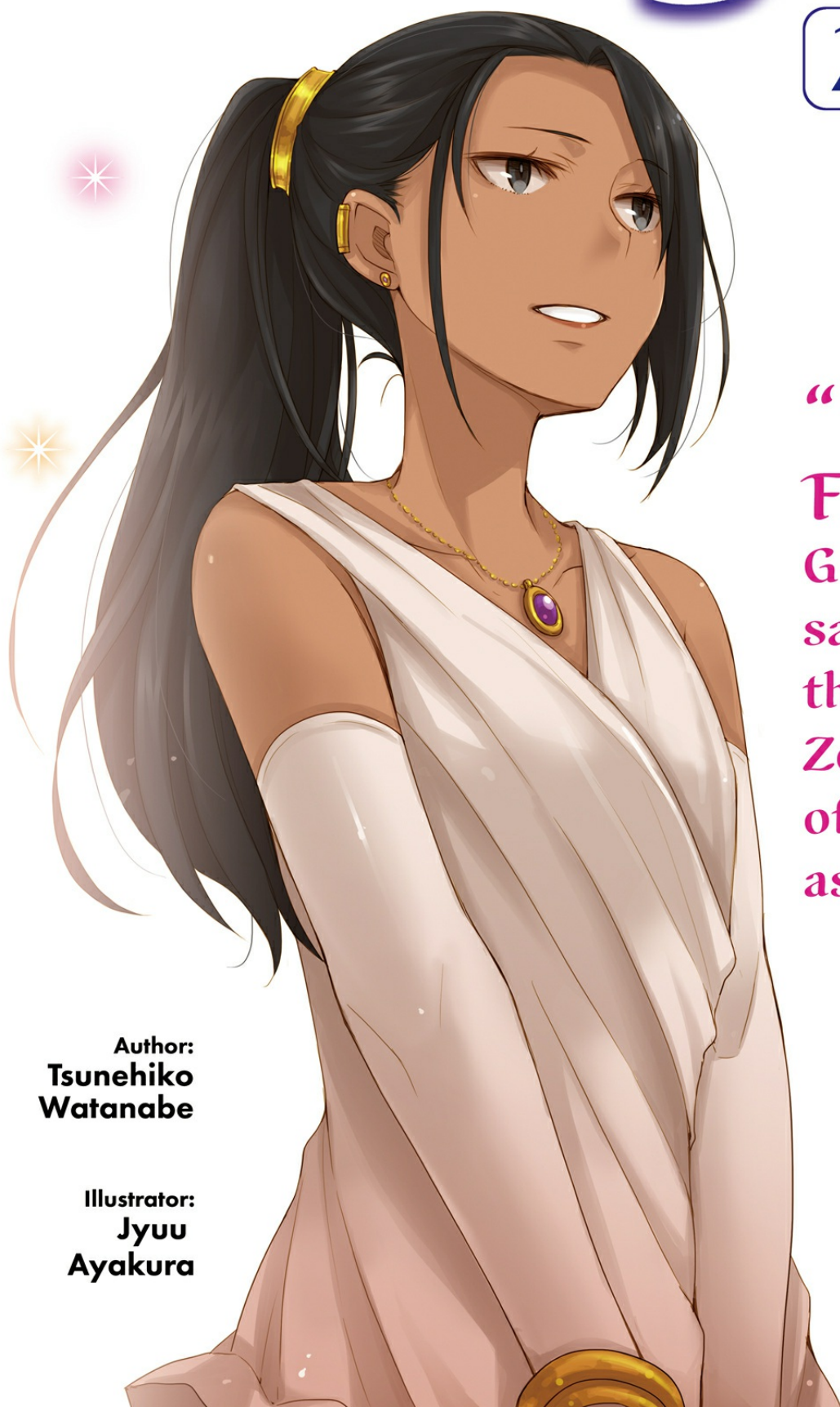
“Kisha’s in the same group, isn’t she? I know where her room is.”

The maids, who usually worked in independent groups, were now proactively coming together and sharing knowledge, working towards a common goal. This was a change that would ultimately result in the entire staff getting along better *and* improving their skills in the process.

The three girls bustling about the kitchen still had no idea that this had been Vanessa’s goal all along, as they moved excitedly towards fulfilling it.

THE IDEAL SPONGER LIFE

2



“My sister,
Fatima,”
General Pujol
said, introducing
the beauty to
Zenjirou, clearly
offering her up
as a concubine.

Author:
Tsunehiko
Watanabe

Illustrator:
Jyuu
Ayakura

They
were the
kingdom's
elite, the
**Drake
Marksmen
Knights.**

Aura was currently
accompanied by General Pujol
Guillén as they surveyed the
hundred-odd soldiers standing
in formation before them. They
were mounted upon large
reptiles called dash drakes.

Aura watched her husband embrace their child with clumsy movements, a smile on her face. This was the long-awaited birth of the crown prince.

“U-Uhmm, I’d like to hold him too... can I?”



"They look delicious."
Faye, Dolores and Letti, the
three problem maids,
clamored cheerfully around
the table.

"Faye, pass me the sugar?"
"Hold on, Letti..."

Their
tea party
carried on
joyously.



INTRODUCTION

GOING WITH THE FLOW'S NOT SO BAD!

Yamai Zenjirou was suddenly summoned to another world to marry a powerful queen. Soon after being told that **he need only provide her with an heir**, their child was born. Indeed, **a prince has been born**.

As for Zenjirou, he's now fully committed to his new world, having been first married to a stranger — even if she was a beauty among beauties — and now finding himself blessed with a child.

This former wage slave is all but being dragged along by the tide, but he has no regrets or complaints. In fact, our protagonist is quite happy to be in his current situation.

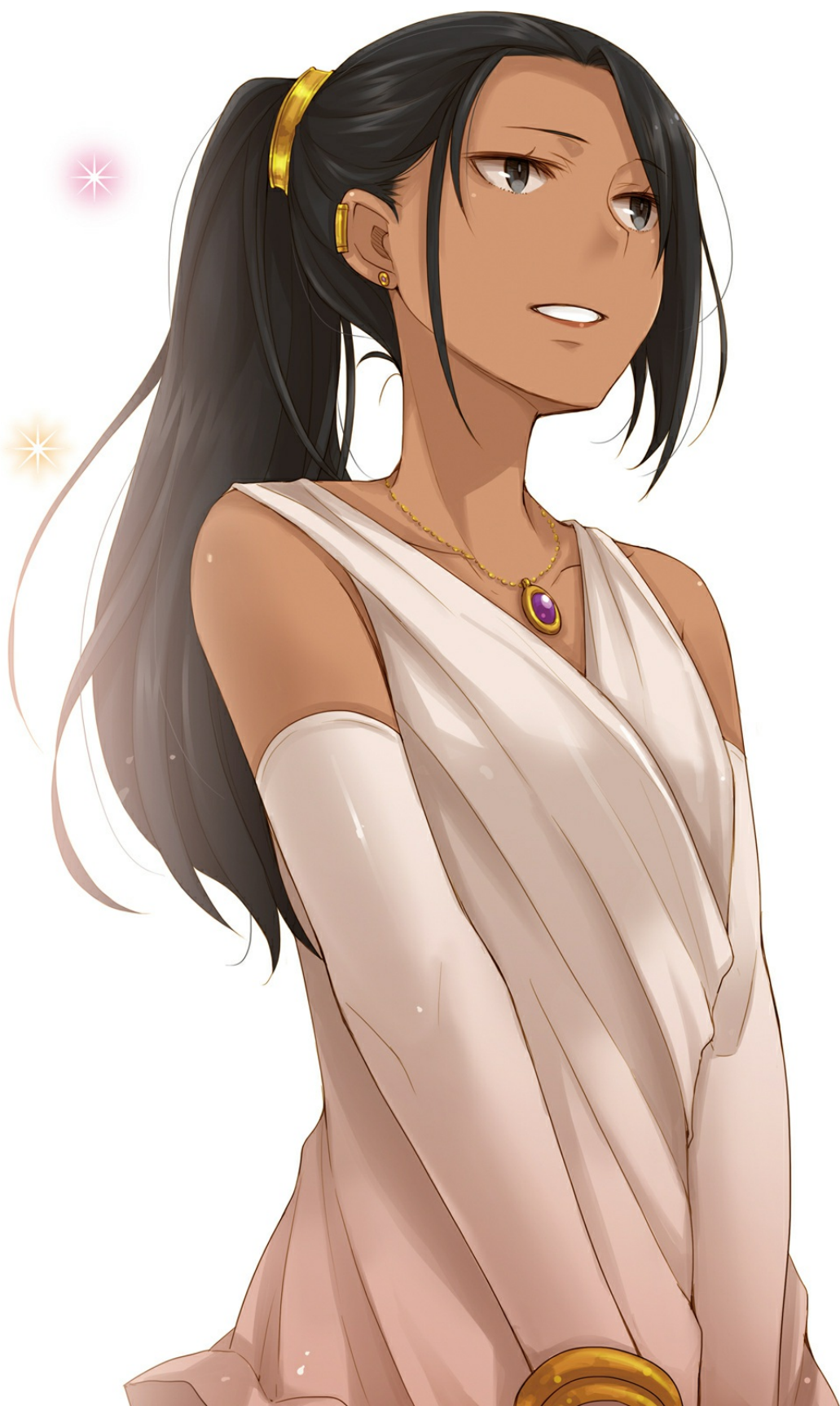
Going with the flow isn't a bad life, is it?

THE IDEAL SPONGER LIFE

2



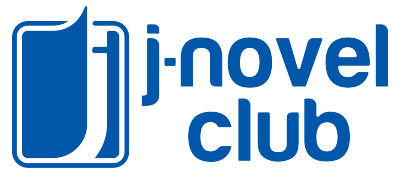












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RISOU NO HIMOSEIKATSU

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